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Homoeroticism in the Novels of Charles Dickens

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PhD

2005

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Homoeroticism in the Novels of Charles Dickens

Abstract

This thesis examines the wealth of representations of same-sex desire throughout Dickens's literary career, deploying a combination of historicist, feminist and queer theory approaches to challenge the continued silencing of sexually subversive material in current Dickens studies. Without eliding their important differences the project explores both male and female homoeroticism, recognising such articulations as part of Dickens's wider exploration of the socially and sexually disenfranchised who could not be accommodated within the rigid parameters of a respectability exemplified by the institution of marriage. This thesis positions Dickens's fiction as central to queer literary history. Identifying key literary, historical and experiential sources for Dickens's acquisition of sexual knowledge, it is demonstrated that Dickens adapted culturally available representations of same-sex desire to develop influential strategies of homoerotic articulation.

Chapter one explores factors that contribute to the received reading of Dickens's work as deeply conservative in terms of gender and sexuality through the case study of Miss Wade. She is retextualised through a recognition of the character's debt to existing models of female same-sex desire and analysis of her relationships' resonance with other female couples in the Dickens canon. The second chapter focuses on the idealisation of alternative patterns of living in Dickens's fiction. The celebration of male bachelorhood and attention to female resistances to marriage militate against critical conceptions of the Dickensian domestic ideal. Chapter three continues the interrogation of the familial ideal, contending that 'in-lawing' (the male homoerotic strategy of marrying a sister of the male favourite) was one of the major strategies through which Dickens and his contemporaries articulated, mediated and transferred same-sex desire. This identification of homocentric strategies demonstrates the fallacy of the dominant critical assumption that the homoerotic emerges most strongly in Dickens's work through violence. Instead, this thesis demonstrates that malevolent manifestations of same-sex desire are part of a wider spectrum of homoerotic representation that also includes highly positive depictions. The final chapters extend the examination of Dickens's career-long commitment to developing pioneering strategies for the positive articulation of same-sex desire. Through attention to Dickens's deployment of homotropical relocation, chapter four argues that Dickens drew upon those sites that were imaginatively sexualised in contemporary culture to re-negotiate the erotically unsatisfying conventional model of domesticity. Chapter five uncovers the highly erotic connotations of gentler ways of touching during the period of Dickens's career, focusing on the Victorian sexualisation of nursing to argue that Dickens deploys this eroticising of nurse/patient roles to develop more affirmative, tender strategies for articulating same-sex desire.

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Acknowledgements

My greatest thanks to my supervisor and friend Dr Sally Ledger, who has been the perfect advisor, inspiring and tirelessly encouraging me throughout.

I am also indebted to the School of English and Humanities at Birkbeck, for providing such a vibrant and supportive intellectual community. Particular thanks go to members of the Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies and participants in the Nineteenth-Century Reading Group, Queer Theory Reading Group and Graduate Research Group. I am grateful for the formative feedback that I received from delegates at conferences where sections of this work were presented. I especially value the academic kinship of all those involved in the ‘Dickens and Sex’ conference, with particular thanks to Vybarr Cregan-Reid and Andrew Mangham for sharing their queer Dickens readings without reserve, and to Anne Schwan, my co-organiser, who I esteem for her organisational skills as much as for her intellectual rigour and friendship. I would like to thank all those who helped to invigorate and flesh the project by discussing, reading and commenting on parts of it; especially Marie Banfield, Laura Coffey, Ella Dzelzainis, Eli Dryden, Sunie Fletcher, Robert Maidens, Reina van der Wiel and Shelley Trower.

The project was made possible by funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council and enhanced by conference support from Birkbeck College and the British Association of Victorian Studies.

I thank my family for welcoming Dickens into our family of choice. This thesis is for Adam, “theguidingstarofmyexistence.”

Introduction

In November 1835 Charles Dickens visited Newgate's condemned cell, coming face to face with James Pratt and John Smith who were convicted under a sodomy law only fully repealed in England in 1967.¹ Dickens recounted this encounter in a short sketch, 'A Visit to Newgate':

[These] two had nothing to expect from the mercy of the crown; their doom was sealed; no plea could be urged in extenuation of their crime, and they well knew that for them there was no hope in this world. 'The two short ones', the turnkey whispered, 'were dead men.'²

As Dickens anticipated, the turnkey's prediction was dead right. Pratt and Smith became the last men to receive the death penalty for what was termed the "abominable vice of buggery"; they were hanged in front of the prison on 27 November 1835. As *The Times* reports, every other capital convict of the September and October sessions was reprieved except these two men. *The Times* reportage infers the justness of this treatment by repeatedly invoking the derogatory contemporary euphemisms "abominable offence" and "unnatural crime" for Smith and Pratt's infringement.³ A similarly pejorative attitude is expressed by Magistrate Hesney Wedgwood, who described the accused in a private letter as "degraded creatures."⁴ Dickens's account however, is notably free of such vitriol, avoiding such popular descriptions in favour of the neutral term "crime". Indeed, Dickens extends to Pratt and Smith the sympathy that at this point in his life he felt particularly strongly for all victims of capital punishment. In the carefully phrased observation that "for them there was no hope in this world", Dickens even implies the possibility of salvation for

¹ Under a Tudor act of 1533 all acts of sodomy were punishable by death in England until 1861, when sentences were reduced to penal servitude of between ten years and life. The death penalty for sodomy was abandoned in practice after 1836, but convictions continued throughout the period of Dickens's career. H. G. Cocks calculates that in the period 1806-1900 an average of "eighty-nine committals took place every year. However, in some years, especially during the 1840s, more than one hundred and fifty men were committed" [*Nameless Offences: Homosexual Desire in the Nineteenth Century* (London and New York: Tauris, 2003), p25]. For further details of the anti-sodomy laws of Dickens's period see H. Montgomery Hyde, *The Other Love: A Historical and Contemporary Survey of Homosexuality in Britain* (London: Mayflower, 1972), pp106-109; and Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet, 1977), pp11-14.

² Charles Dickens, 'A Visit to Newgate', (1836) rpt. in *Dickens' Journalism*, 4 vols, ed. by Michael Slater (London: Dent, 1994-2001), I, p207. W. J. Carlton identifies these inmates in 'The Third Man at Newgate', *Review of English Studies*, 8 (1957), pp402-407.

³ *The Times*, 28 September 1835, 23 November 1835.

⁴ Magistrate Hesney Wedgwood to Lord Russell, November 1835, quoted by Cocks, p38.

sodomites, a decidedly controversial public move given the dominant discourse of ‘abomination’ at this time.

Visits to Newgate would have provided just one way of becoming acquainted with the more disreputable aspects of contemporary life. In the 1830s the prison not only housed those convicted of sodomy, as Sarah Wise has observed it also provided a hotbed for illicit sexual activities: “If two men were kept in the same cell, the wardens had noted that crimes have been committed of a nature not to be more particularly described.”⁵ Colette Colligan argues that Dickens used his knowledge of recent scandalous prosecutions to express the “not-so-covert homosexual proclivities” of particular characters, such as Major Bagstock in *Dombey and Son*. She reads the major’s army nickname, Flower, as a thinly veiled allusion to an 1833 incident in which an MP, William John Bankes, was found after hours “in company with a soldier named Flower [. . .] having been surprised with his breeches and braces unbuttoned at ten at night, his companion’s dress being in similar disorder.”⁶ Bankes’s trial attracted considerable public attention, not least because of the testimony to his good character provided by such well known figures as the Duke of Wellington.⁷ Dickens, as one might expect, given his attention to current affairs as well as his status as an exemplary “observer of human nature”⁸, was fully aware of sexual activity between members of the same sex. As this study will go on to demonstrate, he was far more grounded in a queer cultural and social milieu than has previously been recognised.

Shortly after Dickens’s death, Wilkie Collins voiced a rare dissent to the already powerful image of Dickensian piety. Collins vehemently repudiated the idea, still propounded today, that Dickens’s fiction entirely avoids discussion of adult sexuality. He responded angrily in the margins of his copy of John Forster’s biography of Dickens to Forster’s statement that there is scarcely a page of Dickens’s work that “might not be put into the hand of a child”:

⁵ Sarah Wise, *The Italian Boy: Murder and Grave-Robbery in 1830s London* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), p215.

⁶ Colette Colligan, ‘Raising the House Tops: Sexual Surveillance in Charles Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (1846-8)’, *Dickens Studies Annual*, 29 (2000), pp99-123, p116.

⁷ See Hyde, p110 and Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988), pp58-59.

⁸ Mr Pickwick’s introduction of himself in these terms is an equally apt description of his author. Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* (London: Penguin, 2003), p26. All further references are to this edition and are given in parentheses within the text. The readily available most recent Penguin editions of Dickens’s novels are used throughout.

If it is true, which it is not, it would imply the condemnation of Dickens's books as works of art, it would declare him to be guilty of deliberately presenting to his readers a false reflection of human life. If this wretched English claptrap means anything it means the novelist is forbidden to touch on the sexual relations which literally swarm about him, and influence the lives of millions of his fellow creatures [, restricting fiction to] those relations licensed by [. . .] the ceremony called marriage.⁹

At the start of the twentieth century homosexual novelist and theorist Edward Prime Stevenson, alias Xavier Mayne, included Dickens's fiction within his survey of 'The Uranian in Belles-Lettres'. Dickens's position in Mayne's "homosexual library" provides important early evidence of queer interpretation at variance with the dominant, respectable image:

There is some interest in noticing how frequently certain British novelists have made 'passional friendship' a vehement factor in their stories, even to its being the most vital trait of a book. Thus Dickens, in a series of his stories and their characters: David Copperfield and the handsome Steerforth – Eugene Wrayburn and Mortimer Lightwood in *Our Mutual Friend* – and Sydney Carton in the tragic *A Tale of Two Cities*.¹⁰

More recently, Fred Kaplan, seeking to further modify the aura of pious virginity that still strongly circulates about Dickens, has written that "Dickens's knowledgeability about sexual relationships between males (particularly between older men and young boys) can hardly be doubted":

His wide range of intense male friendships and the special freedom of emotional expression that the Victorians felt appropriate make it rather likely that Dickens was well aware of the possibilities of such relationships carried to an extreme. They existed in extreme form all around him, in schools and clubs, in the examples of otherwise quite respectable members of the society, and in some detail in the fantasies of the private mind and the extensive and easily available night life and pornography of the period.¹¹

⁹ Quoted by Sue Lonoff, 'Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 35.2 (1980), pp150-170, pp156-157. Despite quoting Collins's protest to such a view, Lonoff concurs with Forster that Dickens's "novels, unlike Collins's, avoid displays of adult sexuality."

¹⁰ Xavier Mayne, *The Intersexes* (privately printed, 1908), p279, p369.

Kaplan goes on to suggest that Dickens would have been aware of the “predilection for male relationships” enjoyed by some of his friends, such as Chauncey Hare Townsend.

Indeed, Dickens’s appreciation of the ‘extreme’ end of a spectrum of romantic friendship was not restricted to men. A very brief survey reveals that he was privy to the highly eroticised relationship between Jane Carlyle and Geraldine Jewsbury, and was aware of the intense bond between his friend Angela Burdett Coutts and Hannah Meredith, “her closest friend [. . .] who had been her governess and who remained her lifelong live-in companion.” He also patronised Ada Issacs Menken, who dedicated her somewhat Sapphic book of poetry *Infelicia* to him, and made an effort to meet George Sand.¹²

Dickens’s legal and personal appreciation of homoerotics was bolstered by a literary tradition offering a wide range of variously explicit expressions of same-sex desire. Indeed, many of the favourite reads that he publicly championed, especially those eighteenth-century picaresques of which he was so openly fond, contain explicit scenes of same-sex erotics. In his journalism, correspondence and through the ventriloquised reading habits of David Copperfield, Dickens recounted a personal literary heritage that includes works by Daniel DeFoe, who produced the notoriously Sapphic *Roxana* and the sodomitic poem ‘The True Born Englishman’, and Tobias Smollett’s *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748) and *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (1751) with their explicit comments on male correspondences “not fit to be named.”¹³ Notably, *Roderick Random*,

¹¹ Fred Kaplan, *Dickens and Mesmerism: The Hidden Springs of Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975), p198.

¹² See chapter two for further discussion of Jewsbury and Carlyle; on Coutts and Meredith see Kaplan, *Dickens* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins UP, 1988), p147. Dickens commented on Hannah’s extreme attachment, suggesting that she “would do anything conceivable or inconceivable to make herself interesting to Miss Coutts” (p337); the *Dictionary of National Biography* identifies Dickens as one of the men of letters with whom Menken “contracted intimacies” (*DNB*, ‘Ada Isaacs Menken’), and Jeanette Foster analyses the homoerotic content of Menken’s *Infelicia* (1868), identifying repeated allusions to “soft and tender hands, warm bosoms” [*Sex Variant Women in Literature* (London: Frederick Muller, 1958), p140]; recounting his meeting with Sand, Dickens described her as “chubby, matronly, swarthy, black-eyed”, with “nothing of the bluestocking about her, though absolutely self-confident in all her opinions” (Kaplan, *Dickens*, p341).

¹³ Tobias Smollett, *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979), p199. Such suspicion explicitly attaches to the gorgeously attired Captain Whiffle and his surgeon, Mr Simper. In *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle*, a German Baron and Italian Marquis are chastised for their “abominable practices”. The hero’s “indignation” fails to mask the jubilation of the portrayal of the desiring count’s approaches to the baron, “whom he viewed with rapture”, “then boldly ravished a kiss and began to tickle him under the ribs, with such expressions of tenderness”. The Baron does not share Peregrine’s “just detestation for all such abominable practices”, his enthusiastic response declaring him “not averse to the addresses of the count” (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969), p242.

which imaginatively sustained David Copperfield “for a month at a stretch”, presents one of the most extended, open defences of sodomy in Western literary history.¹⁴ Earl Strutwell’s vindication elucidates the advantages to health and other practical benefits, such as reduced bastardy, of such a practice. He triumphantly concludes with an appeal to erotic hedonism:

I have been told there is another motive perhaps more powerful than all these, that induces people to cultivate this inclination; namely the exquisite pleasure attending its success.¹⁵

The careful caveat in *David Copperfield* that “whatever harm was in some of” these tales “was not there” for the young David (p60), demonstrates Dickens’s appreciation that his somewhat risqué favourites might not be considered ideal reading material for a child.

Sexual knowledge acquired from a respectable literary tradition was most probably supplemented for Dickens by his reading of libertine material such as John Cleland’s pornographic eighteenth-century classic, *Fanny Hill*. Joss Lutz Marsh makes a convincing case for Dickens’s transposition of the central elements of Cleland’s novella to tell a parallel story of female desires in *Dombey and Son*. Dickens could have obtained this text, which includes graphic same-sex bed scenes featuring both women and men, from friends. As Marsh argues, such texts would have been readily available in Dickens’s social circle, which included *Household Words* contributor and freelance pornographer George Augustus Sala and Richard Monckton Milnes, a close friend who was known to be a “generous” owner of an expanding library of erotic materials.¹⁶ Dickens was also a reader of contemporary French fiction, a corpus in which many of the nineteenth century’s most overt homoerotic articulations can be found. He read French proficiently, reading Victor Hugo and George Sand, and stocking books by Paul de Kock and Balzac, whom “he particularly admired”, in his library.¹⁷

¹⁴ Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (London: Penguin, 1996), p60. All further references are to this edition and are given in parentheses within the text.

¹⁵ Smollett, *Roderick Random*, p310.

¹⁶ Joss Lutz Marsh, ‘Good Mrs Brown’s Connections: Sexuality and Story Telling in *Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son*’, *ELH*, 58 (1991), pp405-426, p411. For details of Sala’s pornographic writings see Marsh and Matthew Sweet, *Inventing the Victorians* (London: Faber, 2001), pp194-195.

¹⁷ Philip Collins, ‘Dickens’s Reading’, *Dickensian*, 60 (1964), pp136-151, p142. The catalogue of Dickens’s final library collection includes entries for Balzac and de Kock [*Catalogue of the Library of Charles Dickens from Gad’s Hill*, ed. by J. H. Stonehouse (London: 1935)].

Dickens also brought a particularly queer interpretative lens to less overtly homoerotic literature. As this thesis will argue, Dickens recognised the articulation of same-sex desire in texts such as Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*, Edward Bulwer Lytton's *Pelham* and Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (all penned by authors he greatly enjoyed and revered), strategically adapting their isolated homoerotic expressions into devices for a more coherent and sustained exploration of same-sex desire, to which he remained committed throughout his literary career.

This thesis positions Dickens's fiction as central to queer literary history. Through an examination of the synchronic literary field, with particular attention to Dickens's own reading habits, this project identifies those culturally available representations of same-sex desire that contributed most significantly to his literary stratagems for homoerotic articulation. It is argued that by repeatedly deploying particular tropes across his fiction, Dickens established models for covert homoerotic articulation which were eagerly employed by his contemporaries, including Thomas Hughes and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Dickens's use of particular strategies also anticipates those characteristic of pioneering British novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that first attempted to treat homosexuality with candour, such as E. M. Forster's *Maurice* (completed 1914). The project demonstrates that through cross-textual repetition Dickens developed a particularly homoerotic literary competence in his regular readers. In order to demonstrate the strategic continuities across Dickens's career, this thesis rejects a traditional chronological model. Instead each chapter interrogates novels from across Dickens's oeuvre, being sensitive to the wider cultural and literary context for each novel without allowing chronology to obscure the important resonances between early and late fictions. As a whole, the thesis will illustrate the incongruity between Dickens's recurrent use of influential homoerotically enabling devices and the continued sexually conservative critical conception of him as the most central of 'Victorian' authors.

In this project the term 'homoerotic' is employed to demonstrate the emotional and erotic primacy of inter-female and inter-male relationships over apparently heterosexual commitments and contracts. This designation is also chosen for the same reason that Paul Hammond selects 'homoerotic' "as a wider term than 'homosexual', [as] it applies to feelings which may never be acted upon, and is therefore particularly apposite for literature

which articulates longing but rarely describes consummation.”¹⁸ Marjorie Garber notes that this denotation often has an implied heterosexual counterpart making it more properly refer to “bisexuality (often in recent criticism labelled ‘homoeroticism’, but clearly ‘hetero’ as well).”¹⁹ Without rejecting the probability of bisexual representation in Dickens’s fiction, the focus of this thesis on representations of same-sex desire identifies incidents in which the homoerotic has primacy and priority over any commitment to those of the opposite sex. Dickens repeatedly dramatises intense same-sex relationships in the absence of heteroerotic connections, even when the heterosexual structures of marriage and even childrearing are nominally in place.²⁰ For example, in the variety of putatively erotic ‘triangles’ (of two women and one man and vice-versa) discussed throughout, the third term in the triangle is often erotically irrelevant, falling away to leave a linear homoerotic bond.

Saint Dickens

Despite Dickens’s immersion in literary portrayals of same-sex desire, critics have been decidedly reluctant to recognise a sustained homoerotic dynamic in his own fiction. As this study will go on to demonstrate, even those thinkers most aware of homoerotic elements in Dickens’s writing come to his work with an entrenched set of assumptions through which ‘Dickens’ is figured variously as culturally sacrosanct, heterosexist, patriarchal, homophobic and, above all, eminently *respectable*. These preconceptions – which surround the Victorian period more generally, but have a particularly vehement application in approaches to Dickens – impede the study of homoeroticism in his work. ‘Dickens’ is often so embedded within a repressive hypothesis of the ‘Victorian’ that the terms can become interchangeable.²¹ As Michael Mason suggests “to hear something baldly referred to as ‘Victorian’ must convey the idea of moral restrictiveness, a restrictiveness which necessarily and even primarily applies to sex.”²² Through Dickens, this project takes up

¹⁸ Paul Hammond, *Love Between Men in English Literature* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996) , p5.

¹⁹ Marjorie Garber, *Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p14.

²⁰ Lest this selection of the homoerotic rather than the bisexual seems to repeat what Garber identifies as a pervasive cultural move in which “bisexuality is being edited out of consciousness or disavowed”, it is important to note that primary homo- or heteroerotic attachments are not incompatible with Garber’s model of the bisexual life narrative (p46). Her polemical approach argues for recognition of the permutations and polyvalent nature of sexuality *over time*, recognising the validity of what are currently called homosexual and heterosexual desires in each individual’s more authentically multiple sexuality.

²¹ For more on the “perceived relationship between Dickens and his age” see John Gardiner, ‘The Dickensian and Us’, *History Workshop Journal*, 51 (2001), pp227-237, p227.

²² Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1994), p3.

Matthew Sweet's call to "re-imagine the Victorians, to suggest new ways of looking at received ideas of their culture", in ways that refuse to dismiss "the Victorians' experience [especially sexual experience] as less honest, less sophisticated, less self-cognisant than our own."²³

The 'invention' of Dickensian respectability is inextricable from Dickens's importance to concepts of British, or more specifically, English nationhood. He is conceived as the country's nineteenth-century bard, as the popular comparisons with Shakespeare attest. As Mark Turner puts it, "perhaps no other novelist has since received the same attention, both critically and popularly [. . .] His status in the late twentieth century, rather like that of Shakespeare, approaches myth."²⁴ Alan Sinfield's examination of the production of ideology through Shakespeare is equally applicable to a version of 'Dickens'. Sinfield argues that Shakespeare operates culturally "almost like a religious relic, he constitutes a powerful cultural token."²⁵ Dickens's particular national currency was demonstrated in horrified British media responses to William Cohen's auto- and homoerotic interpretation of *Great Expectations*. *Observer* columnist Barry Hugill figured a sexual reading of Dickens's work as the invasion of the respectable English breakfast table: "Early risers reading this over tea and toast be warned – the next sentence may make you choke. Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* is a masturbatory fantasy."²⁶ With some surprise at this vitriol New York publication *Newsweek* documented the national disparity in responses to Cohen's work: "The British literati are aghast over *Sex Scandal* [. . .] Though the book received polite nods last fall in the US, its British publication caused consternation."²⁷

In his overdetermined cultural status 'Dickens' is the foremost of a handful of canonical British writers who continue to incite particularly conservative reading practices. Sexually 'subversive' interpretations of the lives and works of these iconic authors are particularly taboo, as demonstrated by the vehement response to Terry Castle's exploration of the

²³ Sweet, *pix*, *pxv*.

²⁴ Mark Turner, *Trollope and the Magazines: Gendered Issues in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p126.

²⁵ Alan Sinfield, 'Reproductions, Interventions' in *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1985), pp130-134, p130.

²⁶ Barry Hugill, 'Coded Erotica of "Filthy" Dickens', *Observer*, 12 January 1997.

²⁷ *Newsweek*, 3 February 1997.

“underlying eros of the sister-sister bond” between Jane and Cassandra Austen.²⁸ In the British press furore was fuelled by the canny marketing of the article under the headline ‘Was Jane Austen Gay?’ by *London Review of Books*. Castle’s piece was panned as “lurid” and “absurd”, and she was accused of having a “gruesome imagination.”²⁹ Castle’s response to her critics identifies a cultural “fetishising” of Austen, similar to that which continues in some branches of Dickens study: “People have reacted as though I’d desecrated the temple or something [. . .] I think there is a kind of fetishising of Austen, not only among British academics, but among a lot of people who join Jane Austen societies [. . . The press coverage] triggered off a very primitive reaction in people who use her to project their own fantasies of the past, and the purity of the past.”³⁰

In a recent conference of the Dickens Fellowship, Michael Slater described Dickens’s “iconic status as a national emblem”, and John Gardiner demonstrated that “Dickens has quietly but perceptibly been moved centre stage in terms of who we are as a nation.”³¹ John Jordan has examined the political ramifications of this national status, arguing that “in the post-1945 era of British imperial decline, ‘Dickens’ emerged as an important vehicle for consolidating and reasserting English national identity both at home and abroad.”³²

Dickens’s place as “national emblem” depends on a selective and rosy reading of his life, as a heritage industry determined to purify Dickens’s sex life attests. Dickens’s former bedroom at Fort House in Broadstairs (the home on which he apparently based *Bleak House*) is devoted, rather oddly, to a display of Victorian Christening gowns. A similarly sanitised version of Dickens’s life was maintained until remarkably recently at the official UK centre for Dickens heritage, ‘The Charles Dickens Museum’, based at 48 Doughty Street, London (where Charles and Catherine enjoyed the first three years of their marriage). Here a portrait of Ellen Ternan was allowed to remain an unnamed, (apparently unnameable) mysterious presence until 2003. Finally a label has been added that explains

²⁸ Terry Castle, ‘Sister-Sister’, *London Review of Books*, 3 August 1995, pp3-6, p3.

²⁹ Letters to *London Review of Books*, 24 August 1995 and 7 September 1995.

³⁰ Stanford University News Service, News Release, 16 August 1995 (www.stanford.edu/dept/news/); see also Castle’s responding letter in the *London Review of Books*, 24 August 1995.

³¹ ‘A Man for All Media: The Popularity of Dickens (1902-2002)’, conference at Institute of English Studies, University of London, 25-27 July 2002.

³² John O. Jordan, ‘Dickens and Diaspora’, in *Dickens, Europe and the New Worlds*, ed. by Anny Sadrin (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp239-250, p249. On the domestic political deployment of Dickens, see also Gardiner, esp. p228.

her probable romantic relationship with Dickens. This deliberate omission over the entire twentieth century participated in a wider, wilful suppression of Dickens's biography. Claire Tomalin has investigated the collusion required to maintain the received view of Dickens's highly respectable and benevolent persona: "Many Dickensians, from Forster on, have been determined to maintain the version of Dickens they regard as acceptable, even – as in Forster's case – when they knew it to be untrue."³³

This widespread desire to maintain a particularly untainted personal image of Dickens as national figurehead is paralleled by a wilful silencing of subversive interpretations in much Dickens criticism. Dickens studies in the UK suffer particular constraint, as Jeremy Tambling suggests in his casebook on *Bleak House*:

It is not coincidental that this volume actually reprints nothing from Britain and takes much of its material from America. Perhaps the critique of Britain Dickens offers is best read from outside – where Dickens is not part of the national ideology, whereas he is virtually made to embody it in Britain.³⁴

Although it was held in central London, the recent 'Dickens and Sex' conference was greeted with particular enthusiasm by American scholars, receiving an equal number of US and UK proposals.³⁵ Delegates discussed this national disparity in critical work, suggesting that the 'institution' of Eve Sedgwick has been particularly influential and enabling of a particular brand of Dickens criticism in her home country, where *Between Men* is compulsory on many undergraduate programmes.

Pioneers on Hallowed Ground

Hitherto there has been no sustained exploration of Dickens's consistent articulation of same-sex attraction across his career. Such an absence would suggest that analysis that exposes and celebrates Dickens's commitment to homoerotic fictional strategies is still considered 'off limits'. Groundbreaking influential approaches to particular Dickens novels by Sedgwick, D. A. Miller and William Cohen have successfully insisted on the

³³ Claire Tomalin, *The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens*, 2nd edn (London: Penguin, 1991), p259.

³⁴ Jeremy Tambling (ed.), *New Casebook Series: Bleak House* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p3.

³⁵ 'Dickens and Sex' conference at Institute of English Studies, University of London, 20 March 2004. Organised by Holly Furneaux and Anne Schwan. Five of the day's eleven panellists came from US and Canadian universities.

pertinence of theories of sexuality in enhancing understandings of Dickens's work. More recently, critical attention has focused on those most explicit aspects of Dickens's career where homoerotic material is finally becoming difficult to ignore. There has been, for example, a flurry of interest in the sexuality of the character Miss Wade, the two most sophisticated and suggestive of these readings published in 1998 by Anna Wilson and Annamarie Jagose. However, detailed considerations of the homoerotic in Dickens's work that are not linked to this figure are extremely rare. In 1997 Oliver Buckton suggested an alternative mode for such analysis in an unusually successful biographical exploration of "homoerotic secrets" in *David Copperfield*. Whilst such work has promoted recognition of the *possibility* of acknowledging Dickens's representation of same-sex desire, the narrow focus on single texts has prevented the full extent of Dickens's career-long interest in exploring such desires from being recognised.

Mary Armstrong's 1995 unpublished PhD thesis "'What Can You Two Be Together?': Charles Dickens, Female Homoerotic Desire and the Work of Heterosexual Recovery" offers a detailed analysis of four of the later novels and provides the most comprehensive exploration of same-sex desire in Dickens's fiction to date. The published section of this project (1996) focuses on Armstrong's most pioneering and successful contention that Dickens's representation of female "perfection introduces unquenchable erotic possibilities between and among women."³⁶ Armstrong's thesis offers a convincing elaboration of her "presumption that [. . .] frameworks – such as the family, motherhood/childhood, domestic/social status as mistress or servant – while they are articulated through and around heterosexuality, give specific formulations to the female homoerotic [. . . T]his is not so despite but *because* they are employed to articulate both the need for the bourgeois family and the 'perfect', desirable, marriageable, acquirable woman."³⁷ However, identifying the space that Dickens holds open for homoerotic articulation is only half of Armstrong's project. As her title suggests, for Armstrong heterosexuality is always triumphantly re-imposed in Dickens's denouement; heterosexual recovery is established as "the particular

³⁶ Mary Armstrong, 'Pursuing Perfection: *Dombey and Son*, Female Homoerotic Desire, and the Sentimental Heroine', *Studies in the Novel*, 28.3 (1996), pp281-302, p281. This article is a revised version of chapter four of Armstrong's thesis.

³⁷ Mary Armstrong, "'What Can You Two Be Together?': Charles Dickens, Female Homoerotic Desire and the Work of Heterosexual Recovery", (unpublished doctoral thesis, Duke University, 1995), pp9-10.

process which is absolutely crucial for thinking about representations of transgressive desire in Dickens's narratives":

These narratives are characterised by the work of maintaining perversities (usually female homoerotic desires) and then orchestrating their dissolutions.³⁸

This restrictive insistence on a repeated 'exhibit and contain' pattern is typical of recent approaches to Dickens which only uncover the homoerotic in order to insist on its contribution to Dickens's presentation of a 'normal' heterosexual trajectory.³⁹ Andrew Dowling, for example, employs a similar approach in his treatment of male/male desire in *David Copperfield*. Dowling suggests that the "image of perversity" presented by such characters as Uriah Heep and Steerforth contributes to Dickens's strategic employment of "hegemonic deviance" – "the process of manufacturing deviancy in order to maintain normalcy."⁴⁰ In Dowling's argument the primary function of the 'excess' desires accommodated by the novel is their revelation of how "'normal' masculinity requires an image of its discontents fully to define itself."⁴¹ His method attempts to drain the diversity of instances of so-called 'deviancy', as all portrayals of difference are perceived as reinforcing the very 'normalcy' they appear to resist.

Armstrong similarly demonstrates the erotic alternatives offered by Dickens's work only to capitulate to the received view of Dickens's championing of 'normative' heterosexual structures.⁴² However, her argument that homoeroticism is shut down and somehow resolved by a return to sanctioned sexual structures is in conflict with her pioneering articulation of the lustlessness of the traditional "romance/marriage plots of Dickens's novels, [. . . which] do not actually perform much work by way of *desire* at all."⁴³ In transforming a popular awareness of the emotional and erotic failure of marriage in Dickens's fiction into an analytic tool, Armstrong demonstrates the "constructedness of

³⁸ Ibid., p14.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Andrew Dowling, *Manliness and the Male Novelist in Victorian Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p48, p3.

⁴¹ Ibid., p53.

⁴² Armstrong, 'What Can You Two Be Together?', p13.

⁴³ Ibid., p12.

heterosexuality in Dickens.”⁴⁴ She makes a clear distinction between “heterosexual (romance/marriage) plots” and the “heterosexual desire” which is so rarely a corollary of such structures in Dickens’s work. This appreciation of the instability of heterosexual structures and their emotional hollowness is at variance with Armstrong’s reliance on traditional marriage and romance to recoup and diffuse homoerotics.

The Heterosexual Assumption

Armstrong asserts that in Dickens’s novels “female-female desire, once it appears to block or undo heterosexual romance, is defused through abrupt marriage and deaths.”⁴⁵ This consciously echoes E. M. Forster’s 1927 observation: “If it was not for death and marriage I do not know how the average novelist would conclude.”⁴⁶ Her interpretation of Forster as forcing “the recognition that a story can only make sense when it makes specifically heterosexual sense (or when death provides the same closure)” taps into two connected debates on the capacity of readers and the potential of narrative.⁴⁷

In 1974 the editors of a groundbreaking gay issue of *College English* addressed the question of what sexual material would “make sense” to (or even be noticed by) readers. They demonstrated “how a failure to appreciate the validity of homosexual love can produce critical blindness of the most elementary sort” and argued that “virtually all discussions of sexual symbolism in literary works are accompanied by a heterosexually biased innuendo.”⁴⁸ Later that decade Jacob Stockinger took up the challenge, also formulated by E. M. Forster: “To work out: – The sexual bias in literary criticism. . .”⁴⁹ Stockinger convincingly attributed those gaps in critical apparatus and thought to the relentless operation of “the heterosexual assumption”, in which textual sexuality is always heterosexuality.⁵⁰ In recent years the movement of queer theory towards the academic mainstream has resulted in a widespread interrogation of sexual assumptions. However, the

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p15.

⁴⁶ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p94. Quoted by Armstrong, p117.

⁴⁷ Armstrong, ‘What Can You Two Be Together?’, p118.

⁴⁸ Louie Crew and Rictor Norton, ‘The Homophobic Imagination’, *College English*, 36.3 (1974), pp272-90, p281, p286.

⁴⁹ E. M. Forster’s *Diary*, 25 October 1910, quoted by Jacob Stockinger, ‘Homotextuality: A Proposal’, in *The Gay Academic*, ed. by Louie Crew (Palm Springs: ETC, 1978), pp135-151, p135.

⁵⁰ Stockinger, p138.

continuing pertinence of Stockinger's work in certain literary disciplines is clearly evidenced through a survey of existing approaches to Dickens. Here the heterosexual assumption maintains its ascendancy.

The heterosexual assumption is also still in evidence in the frustration of critical endeavours to reassess the sexual trajectory of narrative. Judith Roof's attempt to dismantle what she describes as "narrative's heterosexually friendly shape" does little more than reiterate Stockinger's concern that "no one speaks of 'heterotextuality' because there is no need to."⁵¹ Roof identifies a dominant "reproductive narrative trajectory" that insists on a plot impetus towards "joinder or synthesis" and "the ensuing (re)production – of people, of goods, of narrative."⁵² Yet she makes little of this awareness of an endlessly perpetuated heteronarrative structure, exposing relentless "narrative heteroideology" without elaborating any escape route: "As an organising structure, narrative plays a large part in the stubborn return of a particularly heterosexual normativity."⁵³

As Armstrong's summary of the limited range of Dickensian denouement suggests, the heterosexually reinforcing finite set of available narrative conclusions is perceived as a particular problem in the mid-Victorian novel. The form most often employed by Dickens has become the defining example of traditional narrative, with closure consistently enabled through marriages and deaths. Thus, the novelistic medium of Dickens and his contemporaries is itself seen as perpetuating the heterosexual plot and occluding alternative sexual narratives, constituting yet another constraint on homoerotic analysis of this period. However, as Barbara Weiss has demonstrated, "each of the major Victorian novelists managed on occasion to equivocate with the terms of this obligatory ending, often subverting it at the same time as he or she paid it obeisance."⁵⁴ As chapter two details, Dickens employed multiple strategies to subvert exactly those conventions of closure that he is often assumed to exemplify. These repeated disruptions of novelistic expectation suggest that the particular narrative shape traditionally associated with the Victorian novel

⁵¹ Judith Roof, *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), pxxxix; Stockinger, p138.

⁵² Roof, p106, p112.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pxxix.

⁵⁴ Barbara Weiss, 'The Dilemma of Happily Ever After: Marriage and the Victorian Novel', in *Portraits of Marriage in Literature*, ed. by Anne Hargrave and Maurine Magliocco (Illinois: Western Illinois UP, 1984), pp67-86, p68.

is also employed as a convenient justification for those readers keen to excuse a preconception that a particular text will *only* offer heterosexual material. Armstrong's insistence on Dickens's diffusion of homoerotic possibilities speaks more to her *expectation* of the fiction and her desire to conform to existing critical approaches, than to the conclusions Dickens actually provided.

"Heterosexist, patriarchal": The Reputation Strikes Back

Resistance to the received reading of Dickens's work as deeply conservative in terms of gender and sexuality has been perceived as impossible, even by those scholars most aware of the erotic alternatives that his fiction voices. Armstrong's ultimate insistence on heterosexual recovery, despite the ambivalence to this concept that much of her thinking reveals, constitutes a desperate effort to make her project cohere with the accepted view of Dickens by draining her readings of their sexual radicalism:

Naturally, my work here does not pretend that the novels of Charles Dickens are not heterosexist, patriarchal, and working hard at constructing terribly binding economic, psychic, political, and physical spaces for women.⁵⁵

In a parallel paradoxical manoeuvre, Sedgwick makes her sexually pioneering reading of Dickens's work compatible with his traditional reputation. Again the recognition of homoeroticism is defused, this time through a denouncement of the sexual structures in Dickens's fiction as misogynist and heterosexist to the point of homophobia. Yet Sedgwick (who [not] incidentally supervised Armstrong's thesis) has contributed most to making possible homosexually nuanced interpretations of canonical fiction.

Whilst recognising a debt to Sedgwick and expanding her theory of homoerotic structures, this thesis is strongly committed to demonstrating the fallacy of her influential paradigm that the homoerotic emerges most strongly in Dickens's work through violence. In her readings of *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Sedgwick conflates male-male desire with brutal attacks, perceiving positive representations of intimacy between men as "much less tinged with the sexual" than the male-male bonds expressed through persecution and murder:

⁵⁵ Ibid., p12.

Imagery of the sphincter, the girdle, the embrace, the ‘iron ring’ of the male grasp, was salient in those murderous attacks on men by Bradley Headstone. By contrast it is absent from the tenderer love between Eugene and Mortimer. They live together like Bert and Ernie of *Sesame Street* – and who ever wonders what muppets do in bed?⁵⁶

Sedgwick only recognises the eroticism of male-male bonds through the paradigm of malevolence in Dickens’s fiction; an absence of violence signals the absence of desire:

The sweet avowal, ‘I love you Mortimer’, almost promises the sunny, Pickwickian innocence of encompassing homosocial love rendered in the absence of homophobia.⁵⁷

In her constant search for the trinity of “homosocial/homophobic/homosexual thematics”, and her irreversible ability to recognise “homophobia, in the absence of homosexuality” but never the erotic without the phobic, Sedgwick risks perpetuating the same violence that she seeks to interrogate. Her final word on Dickens in *Between Men* speaks strongly of her insistence on reading exclusively for homophobia: “The clench, the depersonalised iron ring of violent and unseeing response to the double bind of male homosociality is being passed forward yet again.”⁵⁸ Sedgwick’s selection of *Our Mutual Friend* as the primary source for her exploration of “the uses of homophobia in the domestic political terms of mid-Victorian England” is structured around a false preconception of the limited range of sexual scenarios expected from an author so repeatedly figured as the foremost representative of his age.⁵⁹ Despite their sexually nuanced appreciations of Dickens’s work, both Sedgwick and Armstrong remain unaware of the insidious and critically impeding heterosexual assumption at work in their own projects.

As ‘the Sedgwick effect’ on Armstrong’s work suggests, this paradigm of violence has proved critically seductive, constraining recent readings of Dickens even by those aware of the critical danger of the malevolence model. William Cohen’s analysis of inter-male contact in *Great Expectations* concludes that as “the cost of men touching men is that one of them be pummelled, we must recognise a certain ideological resistance in the text to

⁵⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985), p172.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p165.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p200.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p163.

such erotics.”⁶⁰ Cohen’s reluctance in conforming to a model of Dickens as heterosexual and patriarchal emerges from a greater self-consciousness about the effect of readings (of a type exemplified by Dowling) that overemphasise “the regulatory, often punitive dimension of [. . . sexually illicit] articulations”:

[T]here is a comparable danger in recognising nothing other than their prohibitive aspect, thereby merely relocating the critical institutions that have traditionally prevented readers from identifying erotic pleasures – call them perversions – within so respectable a text.⁶¹

Although Cohen seeks to avoid what he importantly perceives as the “dead end” reading of Dickens as homophobic, his wish to reach a balance between “homophobic and homophilic” interpretation is left unrealised. Cohen’s concern that the apparent savagery of Dickens’s homoerotics “must sit uneasily with any cheerfully homotropic reading” outweighs his call for more positive readings.⁶² Eventually, Sedgwick’s powerful violence thesis is “passed forward yet again” in Cohen’s conclusion that “male homosocial desire is expressed as brutality.”⁶³

Indeed, the homoerotic violence thesis has dominated queer readings of Dickens throughout the past two decades. J. M. Léger’s unpublished thesis, ‘The Scrooge in the Closet: Homoerotic Tropes in the Novels of Charles Dickens’ brings Steven Marcus’s outdated but still influential association of flagellation with Victorian ‘homosexuality’ together with Sedgwick’s model of murderous male rivalry.⁶⁴ This relentlessly brutal approach, under which homoerotics only become visible as “violent ‘love’”, almost totally stifles Léger’s more original effort to identify “valorised homocentric spaces” in Dickens.⁶⁵ Having devoted four bruising chapters to elucidating what he sees as the various “forms of homophobia in Dickens”, Léger fleetingly turns in his final fifteen pages to glance at

⁶⁰ William Cohen, *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1996), p54. Cohen acknowledges his debt to what he describes as Sedgwick’s theory “of the murderous anal erotics that pervade male-male combat [. . .] in late Dickens novels” (p48).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp31-32.

⁶² *Ibid.* p54.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p57.

⁶⁴ Marcus’s *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1966) should be recognised here for its pioneering rejection of the stereotype of Victorian prudishness. However, Marcus’s quasi-psychoanalytic speculation that ‘homosexuality’ and flagellation were inextricably linked in the Victorian imagination (see chapter six, esp. p260), exerts its own violent spectre over queer readings of nineteenth-century literature.

⁶⁵ J. M. Léger, ‘The Scrooge in the Closet: Homoerotic Tropes in the Novels of Charles Dickens’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Notre Dame, 1991), p99, p224.

“Dickens’s ambivalence and ‘approval’ of homosexuals [which] may be found in his inclusion of homocentric domestic spaces in his fiction.”⁶⁶ Léger’s belated recognition that paradigms of violence fail to tell a complete story of same-sex desire in Dickens’s fiction, receives its proper working-out in this thesis.

Vybar Cregan-Reid’s recent essays on drowning and queer waters in Dickens espouse a similar model of violent discipline. Cregan-Reid uses a Sedgwickian model to suggest that Dickens deployed images of “carefully encoded male rape” to enact vicious retribution on his nastiest characters: “Quilp’s death by water, then, functions as the most extreme kind of homophobic insult that Dickens is able to muster for the evil and satyric dwarf.”⁶⁷ This account suggests that homosexuality in Dickens is both punished and punishment, functioning punitively to discipline or erase those who have indulged in such aberrant desires. Under this reasoning Dickens can only be seen to exhibit what Cregan-Reid describes as a “disgust of same-sex desire.”⁶⁸ Whilst Dickens occasionally reacted negatively to displays of same-sex contact as Cregan-Reid shows in his reading of the 1860 journalistic piece ‘Travelling Abroad’, attention to Dickens’s parallel tolerance for prosecuted offenders Pratt and Smith, and his fictionally pursued interest in the caring and life-sustaining eroticism between men and between women suggests that his anxious responses were balanced by a more positive interest in exploring, and even celebrating, such ‘deviant’ desires.⁶⁹

Unclenching the “Iron Ring”: Tender Alternatives to the Homoerotic Violence Thesis

Whilst acknowledging the importance and plausibility of the location of violent homoerotics in Dickens’s work, this project is committed to placing such readings within the context of Dickens’s wider, more positive depictions of same-sex desire. This thesis presents a more celebratory homotropic reading, examining Dickens’s interest in caring and life-sustaining homoerotic contacts. It identifies a range of positive models, including

⁶⁶ Ibid., p224.

⁶⁷ Vybar Cregan-Reid, ‘Drowning in Early Dickens’, *Textual Practice*, 19.1 (2005), pp71–91, p82 and Vybar Cregan-Reid, ‘Bodies, Boundaries and Queer Waters: Drowning and Prosopopœia in Later Dickens’, *Critical Survey*, 17.2 (2005), forthcoming.

⁶⁸ Cregan-Reid, ‘Bodies, Boundaries’.

⁶⁹ Cregan Reid discusses Dickens’s expression of his eagerness to join the homoerotically depicted Parisian male river swimmers, which quickly turns to disgust in ‘Travelling Abroad’ for *All the Year Round*, 7 April, 1860. Ibid.

alternative domestic units, homotropical relocations and tender same-sex nursing, all of which are presented throughout the Dickens canon.

Without eliding the important difference between the two, both female and male homoerotics are considered within this project. Clearly it would be reductive ever to conflate these widely various desires; legislation against same-sex practice was famously gendered in the nineteenth century, and languages and experiences of homoerotics differed widely between men and women. The histories of male and female homosexuality are very different, as are the challenges facing those who seek to [re]construct gay and lesbian pasts.⁷⁰ These distinctions have encouraged thinkers such as Joseph Bristow to resist the term ‘homosexuality’, “because it denies the gendered difference between men and women who desire their own sex.”⁷¹ However, such just caution against eliding gender differences can prevent scholars from recognising useful continuities in the representation of same-sex desire in literature of this period. As Graham Robb has argued “whatever the intention, the historical segregation of men and women aggravates the lack of evidence and helps to keep lesbian history in the dark.”⁷² It is central to this study’s re-imagining of Dickens that he offers highly positive, although differentiated, depictions of *both* female and male homoerotics. Through gender nuanced explorations of the same affirmative motifs Dickens asserts the insufficiencies of heterosexuality without conflating male and female homoerotics.

Chapters one and two address the almost schizophrenically divided nature of current Dickens studies, in which (albeit limited) queer approaches to Dickens, discussed in chapter one, co-exist uneasily with a dominant tradition of more conservative reading, which forms the critical departure point for chapter two. The first chapter, “‘No Lesbians Please, We’re Dickensians’: Miss Wade and the Anxieties of Anachronism’, scrutinises the historical

⁷⁰ Martha Vicinus, for example, describes a particular, gendered constraint facing lesbian history: “Conceptual confusion is perhaps inevitable in regard to lesbians, given the historical suppression of female sexuality in general [. . .] We must first decode female sexual desire, and then within it, find same-sex desire” [“‘They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong.’ The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity”, *Feminist Studies*, 18.3 (1992), pp467-497, p469]. Adrienne Rich outlines forcefully the gendered differential in access to power which must limit any imagined semblance between male and female homosexuality [‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, 1980, rpt. in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (New York and London: Norton, 1986), pp28-76].

⁷¹ Joseph Bristow, (ed.), *Sexual Sameness: Textual Differences in Lesbian and Gay Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p3.

⁷² Graham Robb, *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Picador, 2003), p3.

factors that combine with national and personal investments in a sanctified image of 'Dickens' to further restrict such studies of sexuality. This chapter argues that histories of mid-nineteenth-century sexuality have been severely hampered by a Foucauldian critical investment in theories of the discursive production of sexuality. It contends that the period *just* before official categorisations of homosexuality and lesbianism has been worst hit by a pervasive critical concern about falsely applying twentieth-century labels to earlier relationships. Anxieties about anachronism and periodisation emerge strongly in critical responses to Miss Wade – around whom queer readings and corresponding virulent denials have clustered.

The chapter presents a case study of this contested figure that foregrounds the major methodological approaches of the whole thesis. Miss Wade is retextualised through a recognition of the character's debt to existing models of female same-sex desire and analysis of her relationships' resonance with other female couples in the Dickens canon. Through the carefully constructed continuities between this figure and Dickens's other female pairings it is argued that Dickens educates his regular readers to have an accumulated 'literary competence' for homoerotic interpretation. As the 'case' of Miss Wade demonstrates, homoerotics are not linked to models of gender inversion in Dickens's fiction.

Chapter Two, 'Marriage and Its Discontents', argues that Dickens's repeated disruption of the domestic ideal exposes his rejection of marriage as an inappropriate structure that failed to meet the emotional, erotic and domestic needs of many in his society. The novels' ambivalent closures are examined as further evidence of Dickens's resistance to the traditional, heterosexual trajectory of the three-decker form. The chapter elucidates the benefits of including both male and female homoeroticism within the same project, exploring the different strategies through which both male and female characters reject marriage in favour of same-sex relationships. Dickens's forceful critique of marriage as an often financially speculative contractual arrangement is persistently positioned against representations of eroticism and tenderness that partners only experience through their non-marital relationships. The chapter responds to the critical valorisation of Dickens's representations of marriage by exploring repeated statements of male antipathy and aversion to marriage in Dickens's novels. The idealisation of alternative patterns of living

in Dickens's fiction – especially male bachelorhood and female cohabiting 'sisterhoods' – is shown to complicate critical conceptions of the Dickensian domestic ideal. Both this and the following chapter interrogate Dickens's perceived complicity with restrictive models of the Victorian family.

This chapter also demonstrates Dickens's rigorous critique of the popular Victorian concept of marriage as female destiny. Contrary to current critical expectation Dickens did not perceive intimate female friendship as an unproblematic training for marriage. Instead he represents such relationships as enabling a cherished and reluctantly relinquished intimacy, often in direct contrast to the dearth of erotic and emotional attraction between husband and wife. This section explores Dickens's presentation of the trauma experienced by a female character at the marriage of her intimate friend, focusing on *Bleak House* (1853). It is demonstrated that the representation of Esther's grief at Ada's marriage coheres closely with the first-hand accounts of contemporary women, including Emily Dickinson and Geraldine Jewsbury.

In chapter three, 'Families of Choice: Erotic Triangulation and Bodily Substitution', the interrogation of the familial domestic ideal is continued. This chapter contends that 'in-lawing' – the male homoerotic strategy of marrying a sister of the male favourite – was one of the major strategies through which Dickens and his contemporaries articulated same-sex desire. The chapter both draws on and contests Sedgwick's model of Girardian triangles. It is argued that the triangulation effected by a particular family structure (composed of brother-sister-male suitor) offers a more positive affirmation of same-sex desire than that displayed through the inevitably violent rivalrous triangles that Sedgwick charts. Given that such family models are explicitly portrayed in over half of Dickens's novels, this chapter argues that the strategy of in-lawing gains conceptual ascendancy over the rivalry model, through cumulative repetition across Dickens's fiction. This identification of a variety of more affirmative 'love triangles', in contradistinction to Sedgwick's model, is continued more broadly throughout the thesis, to illustrate the range of positive bonds articulated in Dickens's fiction.

This third chapter seeks to recover the significance of Victorian in-law relationships, an entirely neglected section of familial history. It is argued that Dickens exploited the

contemporary expectation of sibling sameness to pioneer the homoerotic motif of physically interchangeable opposite-sex siblings. Identifying the biography and poetry of Alfred Tennyson and Arthur Hallam as the main source of Dickens's appreciation of homoerotic cultural uses of in-lawing, the chapter argues that Dickens's fiction repeatedly eroticises what was actually a familiar marital pattern in his contemporary culture. The impact of this influential repeated model on Dickens's contemporaries is examined.

The examination of Dickens's development of pioneering strategies for the positive articulation of same-sex desire is extended in chapter four, 'Homotropics'. The chapter contends that Dickens deploys erotically connotative geographical locations, especially France, Italy and Egypt to signify same-sex erotics. This section draws on a wealth of recent critical work by authors such as Robert Aldrich, Rudi Bleys and Joseph Boone on the historical role of the geographical, exotic other in the homosexual imagination. Dickens's relocation of characters, (from Bob Sawyer and Ben Allen in *The Pickwick Papers* to Pip and Herbert Pocket in *Great Expectations*) whose most significant relationships remain unaccommodated by a rigid bourgeois family structure, coheres with the widely documented search for 'homotropics'.

The chapter argues that Dickens drew upon an already flourishing discourse that evaded prohibitions on discussing same-sex desire by locating it as a continental or oriental other. Dickens's appreciation of the travelogue as a highly homosexualised form anticipates both the proliferation of homoerotic quest narratives later in the century and the actual search for homotropics by gay men and women. Although homosexual relocation and 'sex tourism' have been considered strictly fin-de-siècle phenomena, Dickens draws upon existing (homo)erotic connotations already attributed to specific migrants, particularly a wider cultural awareness of figures such as Beckford and Byron as queer travellers.

Chapter five, "'It is impossible to be Gentler": The Homoerotics of Nursing', offers a final rejection of the influential 'homoerotic violence' thesis. Uncovering the highly erotic connotations of gentler ways of touching during the period of Dickens's career, the chapter focuses on the Victorian sexualisation of nursing to argue that Dickens deploys this eroticising of nurse/patient roles to develop more affirmative, tender strategies for articulating same-sex desire. The chapter uncovers a previously hidden history of Victorian male nursing, exploring the emphasis on the sensitivity of these practitioners in the few

available contemporary accounts. It is argued that Dickens's multiple accounts of same-sex nursing cohere with the expressions of erotic intimacy in previous fictional accounts of opposite sex nursing and in (often anxious) debates about nineteenth-century nursing reform. These caring same-sex contacts reveal the limitations of more brutal readings and demonstrate the insufficiency of interpretations of Dickens as 'homophobic'.

Chapter One

‘No Lesbians Please, We’re Dickensians’:

Miss Wade and the Anxieties of Anachronism

Multiple factors contribute to the evident critical reticence in exploring sexuality in Dickens’s work. Even the most pioneering scholars of sexuality are impeded in their studies of Dickens by the insidious, seemingly inescapable current investment in a particular concept of his life and work. Homoerotic analysis is also severely constrained across historical periods by the still present heterosexual assumption. Furthermore, studies of same-sex desire in the period *just* before the official categorisation in the late nineteenth century also suffer from a particular blocking phenomenon, here described as ‘the discursive legacy’. This chapter explores the anxiety of anachronism, looking at how the various impediments on current Dickens study cluster around the contested body of Miss Wade.

The Discursive Legacy

Histories of mid nineteenth-century sexuality have been severely impeded by a Foucauldian critical investment in theories of the discursive production of sexuality. An emphasis on the discursive invention of modern sexual categories has generated pervasive critical concern about falsely applying twentieth-century labels to earlier relationships, and has resulted in a reluctance to research same-sex literary and social history in the mid Victorian period. Whilst this focus on discourse has had a hugely enabling impact on fin-de-siècle studies of sexuality, it has also created an anxiety about how to approach earlier nineteenth-century sexualities. In the 1970s Michel Foucault pioneered the discursive approach, locating the emergence of modern definitions of same-sex desire a century earlier with the publication of German psychiatrist Carl von Westphal’s “Die Konträre Sexualempfindung”:

The psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was categorized – Westphal’s famous article of 1870 on ‘contrary sexual sensations’ can stand as

its date of birth.¹

In Foucault's grand narrative of nineteenth-century sexuality, homosexuality only "began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturalness' be acknowledged" in the final three decades of the century, as the "reverse discourse" to "a whole series of discourses on the specifics and subspecies of homosexuality."²

As Annamarie Jagose notes, "Foucault's emphasis on discursive practices [. . .] has had a massive influence on gay history, everywhere evidenced in [. . .] frequent quotation and paraphrase."³ Even Jagose's keen awareness of this pervasive influence does not allow her approach to escape a relentless inscription of the late nineteenth century as *the* significant moment of homosexual history. Her back-cover synopsis makes explicit that her approach to lesbian historiography takes as its "*pivotal moment* the fin-de-siècle phenomenon of the sexological codification of sexual taxonomies" (emphasis added).⁴ A similar impact is apparent in Jeffrey Weeks's disproportionately sparse treatment of the period before 1880, in a text which purports to examine *The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800*:

It is most certainly of major conceptualising importance that the word homosexuality was first invented [. . .] in 1869; its adaptation into English usage in the 1880s and 1890s was a vital stage in the articulation of a modern concept of the homosexual.⁵

Through such focus, the late nineteenth century becomes the sanctioned site at which discussions of same-sex desire may acceptably cluster, resulting in what Andrew Miller and James Eli Adams identify as a wider lack of attention to "gay history in the mid Victorian period."⁶

¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, trans. by Robert Hurley (1976, rpt. London: Penguin, 1998), p43.

² Ibid., p101.

³ Annamarie Jagose, *Inconsequence: Lesbian Representation and the Logic of Sexual Sequence* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2002), p11.

⁴ Ibid., back cover.

⁵ Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p21.

⁶ Andrew Miller and James Eli Adams, (eds), *Sexualities in Victorian Britain* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1996), p13. In his scrutiny of mid nineteenth-century novels, Jeff Nunokawa seeks to address the chronological bias that views fictions of the 1890s as the "eligible, indeed perhaps the inevitable subjects for an essay on sexuality in the Victorian novel" ['Sexuality in the Victorian Novel', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Deidre David (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), pp125-148, p126].

David Halperin makes an important distinction between Foucault's actual arguments and the selective, and often erroneous, interpretation of his work. Halperin examines the misinterpretation of what has become Foucault's most infamous claim about the distinction between the sodomite and the homosexual, arguing that this is "first and foremost a discursive analysis, not a social history. *It is not an empirical claim about the historical existence or non-existence of sexually deviant individuals*" and in no way prohibits inquiry "into the connections that pre-modern people may have made between specific sexual acts and the particular ethos, or sexual style, or sexual subjectivity, of those who performed them."⁷ The distinction made here between Foucault and unsophisticated readings of his work is helpful. However, the critically seductive construction of homosexual origin in volume one of *The History of Sexuality* does, none the less, lend itself to misinterpretation and critical overemphasis. As Foucault was to observe elsewhere in his work, origins, though chimerical, exert an often dangerous fascination.

A disparity exists between Foucault's investment in an originary narrative of modern sexuality in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* and his earlier dismissal of origin as chimerical in 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' (1971). In this earlier essay, Foucault argues that effective history "will never confuse itself with a quest for [. . .] 'origins', will never neglect as inaccessible the vicissitudes of history."⁸ Indeed, the critique of the popular "belief that origin is the site of truth" and the corresponding mania for identifying "the moment of birth" in 'Genealogy', anticipates the impact of Foucault's precise dating of the emergence of the modern homosexual.⁹ Though the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* explores the various impulses that combined to render such definitions imminent, Foucault's account of the defining of homosexuality slips into exactly the seductive originary rhetoric that the 'Genealogy' essay cautions against. He gives an exact "date of birth" for the new "species", homosexual.¹⁰ Such precise, unambiguous dating is extremely unusual in *The History of Sexuality*; shifts in conceptions are rarely restricted to a single

⁷ David Halperin, 'Forgetting Foucault: Acts, Identities and the History of Sexuality', *Representations*, 63 (1998), pp93-120, pp99-100. In *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1995) Halperin argues that "Michel Foucault has become the sort of intellectual figure with whom it is no longer possible to have a rational or nonpathological relationship" (p5). Given the comparable selectiveness of readings and constraints on criticism, the same could be said of Charles Dickens.

⁸ Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' (1971) rpt. in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 1991), pp76-100, p80.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p79.

¹⁰ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, p43.

decade and almost never pinpointed to a single event in a specific year. This chronological specificity combines with the language of 'birth', identified as so destructive to effective history in the 'Genealogy', and with the term 'species', which since Darwin's momentous publication is strongly connotative of ideas of 'origin'. The tension between this originary narrative and Foucault's overarching method of tracing long term shifts – characterised by phrases including "gradually", "emigrated towards", and "spans a wide segment of history" – suggests the author's particular commitment to establishing a definitive history, a life story, for the modern homosexual.¹¹ As the 'Genealogy' essay observes, such pursuit of origin has wide appeal, which is witnessed by the repeated quoting of the conclusion: "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species."¹²

Foucault's uncharacteristic precision about the disjunction between these two periods has resulted in what Steven Shapiro has described as a "truncated binary, between early modern acts and industrial modern identities."¹³ Shapiro argues that this results from the collapse of the three penal periods identified in *Discipline and Punish* – terror, punishment and discipline, into the *History of Sexuality* binary of early modern illicit acts (terror) and the modern sense of identity predicated on desire (discipline):

What Foucault left out was his operative schema's implied middle, the eighteenth-century form(s) tied to the phase of "punishment," which implicitly indicate the presence of homosexual manner(s) that are neither that of the sodomite nor the homosexual.¹⁴

This omission, Shapiro notes, "has long since bedevilled eighteenth-century studies."¹⁵

This bedevilling 'middle' omission, however, is no less constricting of nineteenth-century sexual history in the unusually precisely dated period just before the 'modern' homosexual's birth in 1870.

Foucault has been entirely successful in his project to re-institute what he regarded as neglected sexological accounts as pivotal discursive contributions to homosexual history.

¹¹ Ibid., p68.

¹² Ibid., p43.

¹³ Steven Shapiro, 'Edgar Huntley's *End of Erotic Pessimism*' in *Revising Charles Brockden Brown*, ed. by Philip Barnard, Mark Kamrath and Steven Shapiro (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2004), pp216-251, p221.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

His anxiety that “it is easy to make light of these nineteenth-century psychiatrists” has been totally reversed through the critical impact of his discursive legacy.¹⁶ Now the opposite is true; because of Foucault’s disproportionate emphasis on the sexological contribution it is now extremely difficult to trace alternative models of same-sex desire to those inscribed in official, psycho-medical definitions. Chris White, among others, has critiqued Foucault’s privileging of the institutional at the expense of the individual: “the relationship between the homosexual and the dominant culture is, in Foucault’s theory, a one-way street [. . .] The theory has, therefore, the consequent problem of emphasising the determinations of individuals by society, effectively removing from them any potential to determine any part or practice of society and politics.”¹⁷

Although Foucault’s account deals exclusively with *male* homosexuality, its discursive emphasis has been appropriated by a variety of influential lesbian historians, including Lillian Faderman and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg. Terry Castle attacks the irrationality of these theorists’ approach by dubbing it the “‘no lesbians before 1900’ theory”¹⁸, and Caroline Gonda describes the still potent legacy of the critical tendency “to see lesbian consciousness as at best a late nineteenth-century phenomenon; no lesbian consciousness before the ‘sexologists’ and their theories, because how can you be conscious of what you are if you don’t have a word for it.”¹⁹ These critics expose the assumption that an official definition is a pre-requisite of articulation, through which the discursive theory self-perpetuates:

The lesbian only became possible, supposedly, after she was ‘produced’
By turn-of-the-century clinicians. The argument is bolstered by the fact
That *lesbian* and *homosexual* are indeed relatively recent terms, first given
currency by the medical writers in the later nineteenth century.²⁰

¹⁶ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, p64.

¹⁷ Chris White, ‘She Was Not Really a Man at All: The Lesbian Practice and Politics of Edith Ellis’, in *What Lesbians Do in Books*, ed. by Elaine Hobby and Chris White (London: The Women’s Press, 1991), pp68-85, p70.

¹⁸ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993), p9.

¹⁹ Caroline Gonda, ‘Lesbian Theory’, in *Contemporary Feminist Theories*, ed. by Stevi Jackson and Jackie Jones (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998), pp113-130, p113.

²⁰ Castle, *Apparitional*, p8.

The neologisms coined by sexologists have dominated critical thought, as apparent metonyms for *all* expressions of sexual attraction between members of the same sex. The just concern that an application of the current term 'lesbian' or 'homosexual' to earlier sexual behaviour would constitute an unhelpful anachronism, has insidiously been replaced by the stifling fear that a discussion of *any* same-sex desire prior to its official definition is somehow anachronistic in a similar way. These anxieties about anachronism reinforce and perpetuate perceptions of homosexuality as literally unspeakable, limiting alternative understandings and investigations of same-sex desire in the earlier nineteenth century. Fradenburg and Freccero observe that such historical concerns can justify the limiting of sexual histories:

While we do not want to talk naively about fore-queers or fore-mothers, any more than we want to talk about fore-fathers, we also need to recognize how our scruples about doing so might function as disciplinary.²¹

New approaches to sexual history have begun to move away from this critical impasse, by exposing the neat account of the origin of modern sexuality as a construction that relies on the suppression of other material. Emma Donoghue reveals the collusion of 'official' records of sexuality with this fantasised origin in her collection of examples from the 1730s that demonstrate the use of the term 'lesbian' "both as an adjective and a noun to describe women who desired and pleased each other more than a century and a half before the OED's first entry for that meaning."²² The unproblematic identification of heterosexuality existing before its official definition (the term post-dates 'lesbian' and 'homosexual' in the OED), has been frequently cited in deconstructionist accounts of sexual history.²³

The reading of Dickens's fiction proposed in this thesis identifies the ways in which same-sex desire was articulated prior to its official definition and dissemination. The project will demonstrate that a variety of languages and rhetorical strategies did exist for exploring same-sex desire, which preceded the late nineteenth-century definition. However, the

²¹ Louisa Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, (eds), *Premodern Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pviii.

²² Emma Donoghue, *Passions Between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668-1801* (London: Scarlet Press, 1993), p3.

²³ See for example David Halperin's argument that "if homosexuality didn't exist before 1892, heterosexuality couldn't have existed either (it came into being, in fact, like Eve from Adam's rib, eight years later) [*One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p17]. See also Miller and Adams, p5.

intense concerns with genealogy, periodisation and anachronism in recent accounts of both male and female homosexuality demand a particular self-consciousness and methodological sophistication in treatments of same-sex desire in the period *just* before the sexologists' labelling of lesbianism and homosexuality.

An awareness of the impetus to inscribe current cultural preoccupations onto past texts is particularly pertinent to this project, given the unavoidable self-investment in modern concepts of sexuality and current sexual behaviours and identities. To minimise these problems of "presentism" Gillian Beer prescribes a rigorously historical approach to texts:

The study of past writing within the conditions of its production disturbs that autocratic emphasis on the self and the present, as if they were stable entities [. . .] The informing of a text with our learnt awareness of historical conditions is not a matter simply of providing 'context' or 'background'. Instead it is more exactly in-forming, instantiation – a coming to know again those beliefs, dreads, unscrutinised expectations which may differ from our own but which may also bear upon them.²⁴

This project seeks to prove that the avoidance of an "autocratic emphasis on the self and present" is fully compatible with an examination of same-sex desire; demonstrating that the homoerotic is erroneously positioned as an exclusively modern phenomenon.

The inevitable presentist bias of a retrospective reading of homoeroticism, is here tempered through a commitment to an inter-textual approach to Dickens's work, which accords the highest significance to those representations of same-sex desire which were available to Dickens. It is hoped that the consideration of the textual milieu surrounding Dickens disrupts retrospect, dislocating the linear dichotomy of past and present. Beer's recommendation of a historicist methodology also acknowledges the potential for a productive dialogue of then and now, in which the past both differs from and "bears upon" the present:

The encounter with the otherness of earlier literature can allow us also to recognize and challenge our own assumptions, and those of the society in which we live.²⁵

²⁴ Gillian Beer, 'Representing Women: Re-presenting the Past', in *The Feminist Reader*, ed. by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (London: Macmillan Education, 1989), pp63-81, pp67-68.

The existence and representation of same-sex desire in Dickens's fiction does have an important impact upon present concerns. Recognition of the homoerotic content of Dickens's work provides a challenge to a society that ensures that such readings rarely emerge. In offering an interpretation which is still considered 'off limits' and unacceptable, the ongoing prejudice in reading, criticism and teaching will be forcefully exposed.

The 'Case' of Miss Wade: The History of a Critical Torment(er)

Explicit critical accounts of homosexuality in Dickens's work, with corresponding virulent denials and careful disavowals, collect around the figure of Miss Wade. The forceful rejections of sustained homoerotic readings of this character demonstrate a continued commitment to maintaining the image of Dickens's sexual conservatism. Strategies of disavowal also bring into focus the ongoing prevalence of the heterosexual critical assumption. Miss Wade's contested body, then, operates as the site at which sexual biases, prejudices and investments are visibly exposed. These debates also bring into relief anxieties about anachronism and periodisation. This section departs from an examination of such concerns, to suggest more effective methodological approaches to this character. The 'case' of Miss Wade is here employed to foreground this project's organising methodologies. A retextualisation of Miss Wade will be proposed, in which she is no longer forced to shoulder the problematic burden of the label first 'proto-lesbian'.

In the brief autobiographical fragment "The History of a Self Tormentor", which comprises a chapter of *Little Dorrit* (1857), Miss Wade reveals that in her youth she had been "altogether bound up in the one girl" in an intense and jealous emotional commitment which she relives with Harriet (Tattycoram).²⁶ Those who have recently sought to recognize the homoerotic dynamic in Miss Wade's inherently physical relationships with Charlotte and Harriet have had to contend with a critical heritage of knowing disavowal. Traditionally accounts that acknowledge the possibility of a lesbian reading of this figure, do so through a denial of the validity of this interpretation. Typical of this approach is Edward Heatley's swift transfiguration and diffusion of the erotic possibility:

²⁵ Ibid., p67.

²⁶ Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, (London: Penguin, 1998), p636. All further references are to this edition and are given in parentheses within the text.

If Miss Wade herself seduces the young females with whom she comes into contact, it is less the seduction of one female by another than the exertion of mesmeric will.²⁷

Jagose identifies the homophobic investment in this type of disavowing account that “‘recognizes’ Miss Wade as a lesbian, withholding that specific term from her in order to fasten it to her more securely.”²⁸ To clarify the fear of homosexuality inherent in such swiftly passing references, Jagose usefully cites D. A. Miller’s axiom that “where homosexuality is concerned, the sophistication that has learned how to drop the subject in passing must be just as suspect as the balder mode of panic that would simply drop the subject period.”²⁹ In another bold recognition of Miss Wade’s lesbian possibilities, Anna Wilson notes the longstanding critical refusal to ascribe homoerotic representation to Dickens, which is accompanied by a positioning of such readings as both misguided and in poor taste:

What is singularly consistent is the unanimity of feeling that there is nothing right and perhaps something faintly disreputable about looking at Miss Wade through a lesbian glass.³⁰

The predictable backlash to Jagose’s and Wilson’s progressive interventions demonstrates the ongoing strength of a determination to preserve Dickens’s domesticated reputation by protecting his works from such readings. Homoerotic interpretations are still positioned as unacceptable, as Janet Retseck’s prohibitive and obligatory language demonstrates. Retseck insists “that Miss Wade cannot and *should not* be read in terms of sexuality [. . .] Dickens succeeds in shaping Miss Wade into a paranoid, delusional woman, but he does not represent her as a lesbian.”³¹ Retseck goes on to assert that “Miss Wade’s sexuality is simply not important here. Although the narrator does remark on her beauty, the narrator focuses on Miss Wade’s body as a signifier of her anger and unsubduability, not of her

²⁷ Edward Heatley ‘The Redeemed Feminine of *Little Dorrit*’, *Dickens Studies Annual*, 4 (1975), pp153-164, p158.

²⁸ Annamarie Jagose, ‘Remembering Miss Wade: *Little Dorrit* and the Historicizing of Female Perversity’, *GLQ*, 4.3 (1998), pp423-451, p442.

²⁹ D. A. Miller, ‘Anal Rope’, in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. by Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp119-142, p122. Quoted by Jagose, ‘Remembering Miss Wade’, p449.

³⁰ Anna Wilson, ‘On History, Case History, and Deviance: Miss Wade’s Symptoms and Their Interpretation’, *Dickens Studies Annual*, 26 (1998), pp187-201, p188.

³¹ Janet Retseck, ‘Sexing Miss Wade’, *Dickens Quarterly*, 15 (1998), pp216-225, p216, emphasis added.

gender and sexuality.”³² In its focus upon the representation of same-sex erotic attraction, this thesis does not want to privilege the homoerotic as the *only* frame of interpretation.³³ However, the insistent blend of heterosexism and homophobia still prevalent in criticism provides the rationale for an exclusive foregrounding of same-sex desire in what follows.

Those exceptional accounts that both recognize Miss Wade’s erotic attraction to other women and attempt a sustained exploration of this desire, are impeded by the difficulty of resolving historicist anxieties. Wilson’s pioneering effort to read Miss Wade through the cultural categories of governess and madwoman through which the character operated for the mid-Victorian reader, fails to conclude on the homoerotic significance of such categories. Instead, Wilson ends with a reinscription of historicist anxiety, which the social historicist approach merely redirects by allowing the text to “turn its critique outward to its readers, who must torment themselves with questions about texts, history, and how to read.”³⁴ Jagose’s insistence that she will avoid the “kind of perspectival error that takes Miss Wade as the imaginary origin of the modern lesbian identity” and reject readings of “Miss Wade as somehow a lesbian *avant la lettre* or even a protolesbian”, is consistently undercut by her contradictory positioning of this figure as contributing to, and pre-empting, the late nineteenth-century sexological pathologising of lesbianism.³⁵ This impulse is marked by Jagose’s reading of Miss Wade’s sexuality through the “medical discourses of disease and contamination” and in her repeated citation of theories of precedence, including the approach that identifies “sites upon which later sexual orders and later sexual identities can batten.”³⁶ Jagose’s reliance on such methodologies sits uneasily with her dismissal of “a certain kind of historical research [that] takes its measure by the extent to which it finds modern identities always emergent at earlier and earlier dates.”³⁷

This section seeks to disrupt the retrospective positioning of Miss Wade, through a focus not on those later official categories that such figures possibly influenced, but on existing representations of homoeroticism that contributed to the specific articulation of Miss

³² Retseck, p220.

³³ Wilson’s caution against “declar[ing] the inner self (the lesbian) the ultimate reality” (p196) provides a useful perspective. In focusing on same-sex desire, this project hopes to extend (rather than limit) recognition of the proliferation of identities that Dickens presents.

³⁴ Wilson, p197.

³⁵ Jagose, ‘Remembering Miss Wade’, p424.

³⁶ Ibid., p429, p427.

³⁷ Ibid., p424.

Wade's same-sex desire. The identification of Dickens's exploitation of prior and current modes of expressing same-sex attraction does not attempt the ever earlier lesbian location that Jagose cautions against. This method instead aims to expose the chimerical nature of origin, by demonstrating the effect and influence of a variety of existing homoerotic representations on later formulations.³⁸ It does not strain towards an ever elusive moment *when* such articulations became possible, but explores *how* Dickens drew upon and adapted existing actual and fictional expressions of same-sex desire to provide coherent models of articulation.

'Frekish' Relationships: Modelling Miss Wade's Transgressive Desire

A direct model for Miss Wade's relationship with Tattycoram exists in Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801). Records from the London Library reveal that both volumes of this novel were amongst the first things Dickens borrowed after joining (issued on 18 October 1841).³⁹ Dickens's interest in and probable familiarity with the text prior to his composition of *Little Dorrit* is attested by this early borrowing. His swift consecutive library loan of volumes of Edgeworth's *Fashionable Tales* that November, suggests that his reading of *Belinda* had made him eager for a greater familiarity with its author's work. Earlier that year he had reluctantly turned down an opportunity of meeting Edgeworth, pleading pressure of work – "I dare not go out in the morning (being very busy) [. . .] sorely tempted as I am to be undutiful for the sake of Miss Edgeworth."⁴⁰

Belinda has received recent scrutiny from lesbian historians, due to Edgeworth's portrayal of a cross-dressing mannish woman whose deviance from social codes is marked by her name, Harriot Freke. The presentation of this character's captivation of a younger woman, Miss Moreton, who "ran away from her friends to live with this Mrs Freke", is distinctly similar to Dickens's portrayal of Miss Wade's relation to Harriet Beadle, who leaves her employer's family to cohabit with her.⁴¹ Dickens's transposition of Edgeworth's naming strategies here is perhaps a veiled acknowledgement of his borrowing, and further

³⁸ This phrase is drawn from Foucault's call for "history to dispel the chimeras of the origin" ('Genealogy', p80).

³⁹ 'Records from the London Library', rpt. Collins, 'Dickens's Reading', p146.

⁴⁰ C. D. to Basil Hall, 27 January 1841, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by G. Storey, K. Tillotson and others, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965- 2002) II (1969), p195.

⁴¹ Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda* (London and New York: Pandora, 1987), p229.

demonstrates the prominence *Belinda* had in his imagination. The name Harriot is displaced, as is the isolated patronymic by which Miss Moreton is exclusively known. This transposition may partly account for the unusual absence of Miss Wade's first name, a rare omission given Dickens's intense interest and investment in character naming. Dickens's fascination with naming makes it less likely that such borrowing was accidental:

[Characters] did not exist for him until he had given them a name and it is that which, like a spell, brings forth their appearance and behaviour in the world. Whenever he saw or heard an odd name he would remember it and note it down.⁴²

In both *Belinda* and *Little Dorrit* a young woman is represented as having been enticed away from familial stability by a threatening female companion. Miss Moreton rejects her "old" and "old-fashioned" parents, "she would not listen to their advice; she ran away from them."⁴³ This is a neat precursor to elderly and similarly old-fashioned Mr Meagles's eventual failure to subdue the servant and virtual ward or quasi-daughter whom he calls Tattycoram:⁴⁴

Wouldn't count five-and-twenty, sir; couldn't be got to do it; stopped at eight, and took herself off [. . .] A team of horses couldn't draw her back now; the bolts and bars of the old Bastille couldn't keep her (p312).

Though these accounts are from the perspective of the abandoned family, they still reveal the respectable household as inherently containing and regulatory of its female members in the formulations "ran away" and "couldn't be got to do it." In *Little Dorrit* Mr Meagles literally imprisons Harriet, the Meagles's cottage standing in for the Bastille that "couldn't keep her." After Harriet threatens departure he "took her to her room, and locked the house-doors. But she was gone [. . . by] morning" (p315). Harriet and Miss Moreton reject this constraining, sanctioned family space in favour of what is figured as deeply threatening

⁴² Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens: Public Life and Private Passion* (London: Vintage, 2002), p220. Ackroyd refers further to the significance of Christian names in his authoritative biography, *Dickens* (London: Sinclair Stevenson, 1990), p28, p556. Further references to Ackroyd are to the 1990 text. For further discussion of the importance of meaningful names to Dickens see John Bowen, *Other Dickens: Pickwick to Chuzzlewit* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), pp38-40.

⁴³ Edgeworth, p230.

⁴⁴ Mr Meagles is positioned as a man of "old cautious habits" (p768). His self label 'practical' becomes expressive of his refusal or inability to adapt himself to different situations, most notably his "unshaken confidence that the English tongue was somehow the mother tongue of the whole world, only the people were too stupid to know it" (p769).

female cohabitation. After their ‘escapes’, battles for their bodies and reputations are waged between their new female (emotional and financial) sponsors and representatives of the traditional familial order. Miss Moreton’s “respectable clergyman” relative, an apt mouthpiece for sanctioned social and moral behaviour, “saw the danger of her situation and remonstrated in the strongest manner – but to no purpose [. . .] Mrs Freke was so much incensed by his *insolent interference*, as she was pleased to call it, that she made an effigy of Mr Moreton dressed in his canonicals, and hung the figure up as a scarecrow.”⁴⁵ Miss Wade exhibits analogous scorn for the attempts of Harriet’s friends to reclaim her, parodying their assumption of the influence she is held to exert:

‘I am at least glad to know that this is not another bondswoman of some friend of yours, who is bereft of free choice, and whom I have spirited away’ (pp628-629).

Through their forceful rejections of sanctioned social intercession Miss Wade and Mrs Freke both demonstrate and contribute to their liminality. Such social ostracism signals the inherent transgression of their intense female relationships. Harriet Freke’s highly visible dismissal of Mr Moreton’s remonstrance incites extreme public hostility, in which rage at the impropriety of her cohabitation with his niece is displaced and vented as anger at the impropriety of her making a scarecrow of a clergyman:

The lady became such an object of detestation, that she was followed with hisses and groans whenever she appeared, and she dared not venture within ten miles of the village.⁴⁶

Miss Wade is even more strongly marginal and marginalised: “it would have been as difficult as ever to say, positively, whether she avoided the rest, or was avoided” (p36). The appearance of subterfuge in Miss Wade’s residence with Harriet in an unmarked, dark and apparently empty London flat and in their similarly insalubrious lodgings in Calais, is exacerbated by Arthur’s identifying both flats as the unlikeliest places to discover them (p317, p627).⁴⁷ This implied concealment of their relationship enhances its status as socially unsanctioned.

⁴⁵ Edgeworth, p230.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ The homoerotic connotations of Miss Wade’s occupation of specific marginal positions, especially her emigration to Calais, will receive fuller treatment in chapter four.

The sexual threat of such relationships is more explicitly articulated through the insistence of the two novels' representatives of respectability that Miss Moreton and Harriet Beadle are helplessly held in thrall. The power exposed in Miss Wade's and Mrs Freke's absolute command of these women has a specifically physical corollary in their eroticized bodily possession of these figures. After dragging Miss Moreton "up by the arm" to join her on top of a rocking stone, Mrs Freke "laugh[ed] loud as she rocked this frightened girl."⁴⁸ A homoeroticism similar to that implied by the sexually connotative rocking of their bodies is evoked in *Little Dorrit* by Miss Wade's intimate touching of Harriet. She holds her hand (p319), releasing it to lay "her hand protectingly on the girl's neck" (p320) and then "put her arm about her waist as if she took possession of her for ever-more" (p322).

Importantly, both accounts exploit the available, explicit languages of illicit sexuality to clarify a specifically sexual deviance from the sanctioned model of marital, reproductive coupling. Harriot Freke encourages her companion in a premarital affair with a young officer, through which Miss Moreton is publicly disgraced:

Mrs Freke, whose philosophy is professedly latitudinarian in morals, laughed at the girl's prejudice in favour of the ceremony of marriage. So did the officer; for Miss Moreton had no fortune [. . .] I am inclined, in spite of scandal, to think the poor girl was only imprudent; at all events, she repents her folly too late. She has now no friend on earth but Mrs Freke, who is, in fact, her worst enemy, and who tyrannizes over her without mercy.⁴⁹

According to this respectable viewpoint, Miss Moreton's illicit sexual liaison directly contributes to the intensity and exclusivity of her relationship with Harriot Freke. Overtly expressed prohibited sexual contact thus becomes a key element in the female pairing, through which its unnamed homoerotic dynamic is strongly suggested.

Mrs Freke is further linked to openly-articulated existing models of transgressive desire through her association with the dominant contemporary paradigm of excess male sexuality: "she supported the character of a young rake with such spirit and *truth*."⁵⁰ Terry Castle explores the historical connection between male rakery and female homoerotic

⁴⁸ Edgeworth, p229.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p230.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

desire in her reading of the diaries of Anne Lister, an early nineteenth-century woman most noted for her frank records of sex enjoyed with women. Lister openly identified with rake figures, comparing herself alternately to Byron and Don Juan:

In a society that typically ghosts or occludes images of women desiring women, the homosexually inclined woman will inevitably be attracted to the next best thing: to images of *men* desiring women. In the transgressive figure of the rake, whose obsession with women is so great as to put him at odds with his society [. . .] the lesbian finds [. . .] her heterosexual twin: the outlaw male whose subversive longing in some ways mirrors and licences her own.⁵¹

Miss Wade is firmly connected with the rakish Henry Gowan; indeed her sexually expressed attraction to his character is proof of his unlicensed sexual excess. Her non-marital ‘amusement’ with Gowan, for whom she abandons her respectable fiancée, marks Miss Wade as fallen woman, the most resonant overt category of sexual transgression for Dickens and his first readers. Importantly, the particular appeal of Gowan for Miss Wade is explicitly that of affinity:

[His sentiments] were acceptable to me, because they echoed my own mind, and confirmed my own knowledge. I soon began to like the society of your dear friend, better than any other (p641).

Her outlawed liaison with Gowan thus doubly figures sexual transgression, as it marks her ‘fall’ whilst establishing the intensity of her connection to the novel’s embodiment of uncontained, excess desire for women. The expression of Miss Wade’s identification with Gowan through sexual dalliance enables the communication of a self-identification with rakishness, similar to that of Harriot Freke and Anne Lister. This strategy signals Miss Wade’s excess within the respectable sexual economy, whilst maintaining her femininity.

What no Moustache? – Performed Gender and Homoerotic Euphoria

Dickens’s portrayal of Miss Wade as a feminine beauty constitutes a highly significant alteration of Edgeworth’s model. In his excision of Mrs Freke’s characteristic mannishness, Dickens provides an alternative conception of female same-sex desire.

⁵¹Castle, *Apparitional*, p104.

Mrs Freke is most at ease “in male attire”, is perceived by others as “the man-woman”, and has a confused gender identity; she reminisces of “when I was a schoolboy – girl, I should say.”⁵² Mrs Freke anticipates the late nineteenth-century sexological understanding of lesbianism as gender dysphoria. Unlike Miss Wade, she fits the category constructed by Havelock Ellis in the 1890s of the ‘true’ or ‘congenital’ female invert. Ellis, the foremost British sexologist of the nineteenth-century fin de siècle, added his influential voice to the pervasive stereotyping of the mannish lesbian by previous sexologists.⁵³ In his delineation of the female ‘invert’, Ellis followed the assumptions put forth by Richard von Krafft-Ebing: “Uranism may nearly always be suspected in females wearing their hair short, or who dress in the fashion of men, or pursue the sports and pastimes of their male acquaintances” and by Edward Carpenter, who imagined the “homogenic female [. . .with] her figure muscular, her voice rather low in pitch, her dwelling-room decorated with sporting-scenes, pistols, etc. and not without a suspicion of the fragrant weed in the atmosphere.”⁵⁴ Sexologists of the late nineteenth century achieved a rare consensus in figuring lesbian masculinity as encompassing social manners, behaviour and physical appearance. As Rita Felski has argued, although “Ellis challenged the stereotype of the effeminate [male] homosexual, he concurred with other sexologists in portraying the lesbian as a gruff, often grotesque, mannish figure.”⁵⁵ In the histories of those homosexual women where the requisite “trace of masculinity” appeared to be absent, Ellis made a concerted effort to detect any manifestation of manliness. Struggling with the protagonist of *History Thirty-Four*’s apparent absolute accordance with contemporary conceptions of femininity, Ellis turns to the body for contradictory, masculine evidence:

The general conformation of the body is feminine. But with arms, palms up, extended in front of her with inner sides of hands touching, she cannot bring the inner sides of forearms together, as nearly every woman can, showing

⁵² Edgeworth, p38, p200, p209.

⁵³ Lucy Bland offers a helpful summary of Ellis’s conception of the mannish lesbian, which was related to the pervasive “belief that a woman was generally sexually passive; thus, if a woman was witnessed as taking the sexual initiative, she must possess a degree of ‘male-ness’”. Assuming that only opposites attract, the ‘masculine’ aspect of the female invert compelled her attraction to a ‘feminine’ woman – not to another (mannish) ‘true’ female invert, but an ‘artificial’ homosexual, ‘a class in which homosexuality [. . .] is only slightly marked’” [*Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality 1885-1914* (London: Penguin, 1995), p263].

⁵⁴ Krafft Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 1886, rpt. in *Sexology Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science*, ed. by Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp46-47; Edward Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex*, 1896, rpt. in *Sexology Uncensored*, pp50-51.

⁵⁵ Rita Felski, ‘Introduction’ to *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires*, ed. by Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp1-8, p3.

that the feminine angle of the arm is lost.⁵⁶

Through such feats of intellectual acrobatics Ellis concluded that “the chief characteristic of the sexually inverted woman is a certain degree of masculinity.”⁵⁷ This mannishness was most often seen as manifest in physical appearance.

Lucy Bland and Laura Doan have made a timely call for a greater complexity in critical responses to sexology.⁵⁸ They emphasise conflicts between sexologists, arguing that the profession did not present the united front which is often assumed. There was, however, an unusual consensus between sexologists over the conception of female homosexuality as gender inversion. Esther Newton has demonstrated that “from about 1900 on, this cross-gender figure became the public symbol of the new social/ sexual category ‘lesbian.’”⁵⁹ Whilst being sensitive to the various levels of access to sexological thinking in the early twentieth century, Bland has attempted to assess the extent of sexological, particularly Ellis’s, influence:

According to one enthusiast, Ellis’s work ‘established the basic moral categories for nearly all subsequent sexual theorising, including [. . .] Masters and Johnson’ – it certainly established certain views about female sexuality which have been replicated in numerous texts right up until the present.⁶⁰

This sexological influence persists in the greater historical and cultural visibility of the butch. Joan Nestle has explored the occlusion of the femme and the damaging legacy of the negative sexological concept of the feminine invert as an “imperfect deviant, as the pure female invert feels like a man.”⁶¹ Furthermore, the sexological emphasis on identifying sexuality through masculine and feminine traits persists in the popular misconception that

⁵⁶ Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion*, 1897, rpt. in *Sexology Uncensored*, p56.

⁵⁷ Ellis, quoted by Esther Newton, ‘The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman’, in *Palatable Poison: Critical Perspectives on The Well of Loneliness*, ed. by Laura Doan and Jay Prosser (New York: Columbia UP, 2002), pp89-108, p97.

⁵⁸ They emphasise the dual effect of sexological labelling: “Some welcome the sexological creation of the homosexual for its powerful explanatory models of self-identity and its facilitation of a modern gay and lesbian subculture. Others, however, disparage sexology for the role it is thought to have played in the stigmatising and pathologising of homosexuals and homosexual desire” (Bland and Doan, *Sexology in Culture*, p41).

⁵⁹ Newton, p91.

⁶⁰ Bland, *Banishing*, p258.

⁶¹ Joan Nestle, (ed.), ‘The Femme Question’, in *The Persistent Desire: A Femme Butch Reader* (Boston: Alyson, 1992), pp138-146, p140, p143.

all lesbian relationships are composed of a more masculine and more feminine partner. As Sally Munt points out, “the two most public lesbian genders are butch and femme [. . .] Butch/femme has become a form of self-representation for lesbians; it gives lesbian desire a partial, sometimes reluctant entry into the symbolic realm of language and culture.”⁶² The overdetermined visibility of butch/femme at the start of the twenty-first century is a sexological legacy, which also impacts on current understandings of pre-sexological desires between women. If the predominance of the butch model has resulted in the historical obscurity of femme, how much more hidden from history are those, like Miss Wade, with indeterminate gender styles who are not accommodated within the dominant current butch/femme paradigm?

Miss Wade signals the incompleteness of Judith Halberstam’s account of “masculine women in nineteenth-century literature, [who] symbolise[d] not only the emergence of a model of active female sexuality but also a predatory form of female desire.” Halberstam sees the Victorian period as the early part of a cultural trajectory in which “lesbianism has long been associated with female masculinity.”⁶³ Halberstam proposes Wilkie Collins’s hirsute, “hairy and scary” Marion Halcombe (from *The Woman in White* of 1860) as the exemplar of the active woman-desirer. Retrospectively employing Ellis’s language, Halberstam states that “Marian, quite obviously, represents female inversion.”⁶⁴ Under this logic Miss Wade’s moustache becomes conspicuous by its absence. Readings of lesbianism through gender inversion are challenged by Dickens’s repeated emphasis on Miss Wade’s feminine physicality. Whilst Marion’s facial masculinity provokes the panicked, misogynist charge of ugliness,⁶⁵ Miss Wade is introduced as “a handsome young Englishwoman” (p34), is widely admired (p639) and described by other characters as “fair” (p35), “pretty” (p638) and beautiful (p36). Despite this absence of the trappings of physical

⁶² Sally Munt, (ed.), *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender* (London and Washington: Cassell, 1998), p4. Gayle Rubin has argued for a more balanced appreciation of lesbianism to include those with indeterminate gender styles. See ‘Of Catamites and Kings: Reflections on Butch, Gender and Boundaries’, in *The Persistent Desire*, pp466-482, p467.

⁶³ Judith Halberstam, ‘The Good, The Bad and the Ugly: Men, Women and Masculinity’ in *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory: New Directions*, ed. by Judith Kegan Gardiner (New York: Columbia UP, 2002), pp345-367, p359.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p361. For an earlier linkage of Marion’s masculinity and her sexuality see D. A. Miller, ‘Cage Aux Folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*’, *Representations*, 14 (1986), pp107-136. Miller suggests that at the start of the novel Marion can be read as “‘phallic’, ‘lesbian’ and male identified” (p125), her lesbian legibility implicitly deriving from her masculine identity.

⁶⁵ Halberstam convincingly argues that “this remarkably explicit depiction of female ugliness [. . .] makes clear the ways in which masculinity and racial otherness tend to be linked with aesthetic displeasure (p360).

masculinity that Halberstam sees as prerequisites to representations of active female desire in the period, Miss Wade does present a forceful example of the energetically desiring woman.⁶⁶ Dickens's ability to represent a form of desire unlinked to bodily mannishness, suggests that prior to sexology, active desire and masculinity were not perceived as entirely inextricable concepts. Martha Vicinus has usefully charted the way in which sexological categories were anticipated in medical, legal and pornographic discourses earlier in the nineteenth century.⁶⁷ However, as the disagreement between Dickens's and Collins's representations of women loving women demonstrate, these categories were still under negotiation. Only with the sexologists did the link between homoeroticism and gender inversion become conceptually fixed. In Ellis's work these terms became undivorceable, as Ellis viewed a woman's acting on her desire as a form of gender inversion:

The inverted woman's masculine element may, in the least degree, consist only in the fact that she makes advances to the woman to whom she is attracted and treats all men in a cool, direct manner.⁶⁸

Miss Wade's self-governing independence does distinguish her from contemporary conceptions of normative passive femininity, but Dickens configures her departure from the model as feminine aberrance rather than as an appropriation of masculine characteristics.

Male effeminacy has proved another influential category in readings of pre-sexological homoerotics. Léger, for instance, suggests that "Dickens's pejorative 'effeminisation' of several of his male characters within his deployment of homocentric erotic situations is an identification with homophobic intent":

If in an era affected by the assumptions of the stereotype, namely that homosexual men were 'effeminate', Dickens renders certain of his characters 'effeminate', it seems clear that he does this in an attempt to underscore his disapproval of them by employing in their description traits his culture would in fact identify with a group of men 'sodomites', that suffered that culture's condemnation.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Halberstam has done important work on the diversity of female masculinities that become homogenised and grossly over-simplified in sexological accounts of lesbianism. This, however, only goes part of the way towards a much needed wider project of identifying the myriad forms of female homoerotic desire in the nineteenth century that have been occluded by the ongoing cultural over-determination of the inversion model.

⁶⁷ Martha Vicinus, 'They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong', p485.

⁶⁸ Ellis, p50.

This 'stereotype' became most visible in the later dominant sexological model of the effeminate homosexual, which proliferated from the 1870s. The perceived sexological emphasis on the femininity of the male homosexual has been seen as a logical progression from earlier feminine models. As Gert Hekma argues, sexologists' theories "built on certain modes of behaviour developed in the cultures of the 'sodomites' and 'mollies' of those and earlier days."⁷⁰ However, as Hekma goes on to observe, neither the sexological models nor the previous behaviours on which they were partly based made such a simple equation of male homosex and effeminacy. Observing the masculine performances of "working-class boys and soldiers who made up a large part of male prostitution" in the 1860s, Hekma concludes that "feminine behaviour was an integral part of same-sex worlds, but other modes existed simultaneously."⁷¹ H. G. Cocks argues that "it is generally agreed by historians of sexuality that there were popular discourses which associated effeminacy and same-sex desire in identifiable ways before the rise of sexology."⁷² However, Hekma and Cocks's acknowledgement of the gaps in this generalisation – there were ways of reading for sodomy "which *sometimes but not always*, depended on interpreting effeminacy as a sign of unnatural desire" – exposes the alternative, potential strategies of interpretation which have not been fully explored under a dominant critical model of reading for effeminacy.⁷³ A similarly qualified picture emerges in Hekma's account of the myriad sexological departures from the effeminate model: "There were important counter currents especially among homosexual intellectuals who disliked being conceptually emasculated and recast as quasi-feminine or who did not feel effeminate at all."⁷⁴ Figures as diverse as

⁶⁹ J. M. Léger, 'The Scrooge in the Closet', pp15-16. Through the pervasive limiting linkage of homosexuality and effeminacy M. E. Braddon's feminised Robert Audley has become the most visible example of mid-Victorian homosexual characterisation. In 'The Victorian Villainess and the Patriarchal Unconscious', *Literature and Psychology*, 40.3 (1994), pp1-25, Lynda Hart argues that "Braddon unmistakably feminises her hero down to the birds and the flowers that decorate his bachelor apartments." Hart insists that Robert Audley's "lack of interest in his pretty cousin" is directly linked to "his odd dislike for manly activities" (p6). Jennifer Kushnier makes a similar connection in 'Educating Boys to Queer: Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 30.1 (2002), pp61-75, arguing that "Braddon characterises Robert as having effeminate mannerisms and a strong longing to be with George" (p61). Kushnier goes on to make a reductive and unhelpful equation between Robert's desire and that of a female character: "Just as Alicia thinks of Robert, Robert thinks of George" (p65).

⁷⁰ Gert Hekma, "A Female Soul in a Male Body": Sexual Inversion as Gender Inversion in Nineteenth-Century Sexology', in *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. by Gilbert Herdt (New York: Zone, 1994), pp213-241, p213.

⁷¹ Ibid., p231. For more on the diversity of gendered homosexual behaviours at this time see Jeffrey Weeks, 'Inverts, Perverts and Mary-Annes: Male Prostitution and the Regulation of Homosexuality in England in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 6.1-2 (1980-1), pp113-134.

⁷² Cocks, *Nameless Offences*, p90.

⁷³ Ibid. Emphasis added.

⁷⁴ Hekma, p234.

Ellis and erotic poet Elisar von Kupffer provided energetic resistance, and even those most associated with the third sex theory, such as Karl Ulrichs, acknowledged the diversity of homosexual gender.⁷⁵ These various departures from the inversion model demonstrate that even later in the century, effeminacy was not the only available mode for reading male homosexuality.

Jay Prosser has critiqued the limitations of the pervasive academic linkage of homosexuality with effeminacy, demonstrating the resulting occlusion of other identifications, such as transsexuality: "Homosexual desire has continued to dominate work uncovering the invert [. . .] Concomitantly inversion's cross-gender paradigms have been considered the 'discursive frame' for homosexuality."⁷⁶ As well as limiting understandings of gender identification, the perceived dominance of this "discursive frame" also continues to obscure a range of other experiences of same-sex desire. As this project will go on to demonstrate, a diversity of gender identities attach to Dickens's homoerotically desiring men. This further suggests that the emphasis on gender inversion is the effect of a later critical lens, which distorts current reflections of Victorian sexual representation.

As demonstrated in the 'case' of Miss Wade, Dickens presents coherent models of same-sex erotics that disrupt what Judith Butler has critiqued as "the most reductive" "heterosexual logic that requires that identification and desire be mutually exclusive."⁷⁷ As Butler argues, this constraining perceived link between gender and sexual practice persists because "the thought of sexual difference *within* homosexuality has yet to be theorised in its complexity."⁷⁸ The 'case' of Miss Wade demonstrates the variety of available languages through which the homoerotic could be expressed prior to official formulations. It also reveals the divergence of these strategies from the models imposed later by sexologists, suggesting the potential for more fluid conceptions of same-sex desire which do not rely on the paradigm of gender inversion.

⁷⁵ See Hekma, pp227-228, p218. On Ellis's resistance see Felski, p3.

⁷⁶ Jay Prosser, 'Transsexuals and the Transsexologists: Inversion and the Emergence of Transsexual Subjectivity', in *Sexology in Culture*, pp116-131, p116.

⁷⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p239.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p240.

'Queen' Byron's Dolling Up: Dickens's Exposure of Gender Construction

Throughout his fiction Dickens describes a number of gender inverts, but this is not conceptually linked to sexual choice. Early in *Little Dorrit*, for example, Dickens offers an appreciation of female masculinity. Mrs Clennam's servant Affery is described as "a tall hard-favoured sinewy old woman, who in her youth might have enlisted in the Foot Guards without much fear of discovery" (pp48-49). There is no suggestion, however, that Affery's masculinity predisposes her to desire women. Similarly, the most notorious bearded lady of Dickens's fiction, Sally Brass of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), is implicated in one of his most compelling portrayals of opposite-sex desire, a plot which convinces despite being (or perhaps because it is) so carefully suppressed:

She bore a striking resemblance to her brother, Sampson – so exact, indeed was the likeness between them, that had it consorted with Miss Brass's maiden modesty and gentle womanhood to have assumed her brother's clothes in a frolic and sat down beside him, it would have been difficult for the oldest friend of the family to determine which was Sampson and which Sally, especially as the lady carried upon her upper lip certain reddish demonstrations, which, had the imagination been assisted by her attire, might have been mistaken for a beard.⁷⁹

The sisterly replication of the brother's body is a useful homoerotic technique, as chapter three will discuss, but not one that need affect Sally's sexual choice. Indeed, the novel repeatedly implies that Sally has succumbed to the sexually magnetic Quilp, whose unusual body operates as a central locus of desire throughout the novel. In the proofs Dickens made Sally's maternity of the Marchioness (Sophronia) explicit, although unsubtle lines such as "I am her mother. She is my child. There. Now what do you say?" were cut from chapter sixty-six before publication.⁸⁰ As Norman Page and others have argued, "the idea that Quilp may be the girl's father finds some discreetly worded support" at various points

⁷⁹ Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (London: Penguin, 2000), p251. All further references are to this edition and are given in parentheses within the text.

⁸⁰ For a fuller discussion of the cancelled section see Gerald Grubb, 'Dickens's Marchioness Identified', *Modern Language Notes*, 68.3 (1953), pp162-165.

elsewhere in the extant text.⁸¹ A particularly heavy hint linking Sally to the satyric dwarf remains in the final chapter:

Sophronia herself supposed she was an orphan; but Mr Swiveller, putting Various slight circumstances together, often thought that Miss Brass must know better than that; and, having heard from his wife of her strange interview with Quilp, entertained sundry misgivings whether that person, in his lifetime, might not also have been able to solve the riddle, had he chosen (p533).

In her implied maternity of an illegitimate child, Sally is firmly associated with another model of socially aberrant desire; however, her female masculinity does not associate her with woman loving. Instead Sally's 'manliness' serves to expose the artificial construction of gender categories. Her proficiency at business confuses her brother's conventional interpretation of gender through occupation: he "was so habituated to having her near him in a man's capacity, that he had gradually accustomed himself to talk to her as though she were really a man" (p252). Performing a role usually reserved for men, Sally's ambiguous body refuses to register her biological difference, and she relies on womanly costume to mark a 'femininity' that would become illegible were she to have "assumed her brother's clothes." As with Affery Flintwich, Sally is surrounded by speculation about her ability to pass: "Some said with confidence that she had gone down to the docks in male attire, and had become a female sailor; others darkly whispered that she had enlisted as a private in the second regiment of Foot Guards" (p549). These references to the most sensational forms of passing, through which contemporary women successfully held otherwise exclusively male military and nautical roles, suggests Dickens's understanding of the way that conventional gender roles failed some of the women in his society.⁸²

⁸¹ Norman Page, notes to the Penguin edition, p574. Grubb argues that "Quilp's remarkable behaviour upon his discovery of the 'small servant'" derives from his recognition of his own likeness "in her dwarfism, and, perhaps, in her features" (p164).

⁸² Julie Wheelwright's survey of women who dressed as men from 1750-1920, highlights these particular occupations as the most culturally visible forms of cross-dressing: "Although there is mounting evidence of women donning men's clothes to enter a wide range of occupations, the best-documented cases are those of women soldiers and sailors." Wheelwright documents the popular appearance of the warrior heroine in books, periodicals and music halls throughout the nineteenth century [*Amazons and Military Maids: Women who Dressed as Men in the Pursuit of Life, Liberty and Happiness* (London: Pandora, 1989), pp8-9]. In *Barnaby Rudge* Dickens offers another depiction of cross-dressed 'military maids' in his description of the rioting prison-breakers: "There was more than one woman there, disguised in man's attire, and bent upon the rescue of a child or brother" [*Barnaby Rudge* (London: Penguin, 2003). All further references are to this edition and are given in parentheses within the text]. Dickens acquired first-hand experience of such heroic cross-dressing in his visit to a female convict at Kingston prison, who had "acted as bearer of secret

Dickens's appreciation of the insufficiencies of ascribed gendered behaviours is bolstered by an awareness, which runs throughout his works, of gender as performative. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* Dickens oscillates between a less interrogative view of gender as innate and what might appear to be a proto-Butlerian appreciation of gender performance. In his description of Sampson, who "in his deep debasement really seemed to have changed sexes with his sister, and to have made over to her any spark of manliness he might have possessed" (p501), Dickens implies that there is some authentic essence of "manliness", whilst simultaneously calling into question the inevitable attachment of that manliness to the biologically male body. In the qualification "*might* have possessed", there is a suggestion that Sampson can be male without ever having been manly, and that manliness might just as comfortably inhabit a female body.

This novel also incorporates a startlingly explicit model for the artificiality and theatricality of gender. Under the inventiveness of waxwork exhibitor, Mrs Jarley, the mannequins undergo complete transformations of persona and sex through the slightest adjustment of props:

Mr Pitt in a nightcap and bedgown, and without his boots, represented the poet Cowper with perfect exactness; and Mary Queen of Scots in a dark wig, white shirt-collar, and male attire, was such a complete image of Lord Byron that the young ladies quite screamed at it. Miss Monflathers, however rebuked this enthusiasm, and took occasion to reprove Mrs Jarley for not keeping her collection more select, observing that His Lordship had held certain free opinions quite incompatible with wax-work honours, and adding something about a Dean and Chapter, which Mrs Jarley did not understand (pp221-3).

Andrew Elfenbein describes this scene as a "fictional representation of Byron's androgyny", one of many contemporary depictions that "drew attention to his femininity" and Page reads the schoolmarm's disapproval as an only slightly masked reference to

dispatches for the self-styled Patriots on Navy Island, during the Canadian Insurrection: sometimes dressing as a girl, and carrying them in her stays; sometimes attiring herself as a boy, and secreting them in the lining of her hat. In the latter character she always rode as a boy would, which was nothing to her, for she could govern any horse that any man could ride, and could drive four-in-hand with the best whip in these parts" [*American Notes* (1842), collected in *American Notes and Pictures from Italy* (London: Oxford UP, 1957), p207].

Byron's scandalous reputation.⁸³ Dickens's specific choice of Byron – a figure that flamboyantly transcended conventional boundaries of both gender and sexuality – for this transformative dolling-up, critiques the limiting fixity of established categories of masculinity and femininity.

Furthermore, the easy transition from Queen to Lord, effected through nothing more than “a dark wig, white shirt-collar, and male attire” operates to expose gender construction. The drag act of the Queen's model operates with a similar meaning to that assigned by Butler to more fleshy drag performances: “As imitations which effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself.”⁸⁴ Whilst (as Butler has acknowledged) there are limitations to a theory of drag that assumes radical, transformative potential across a wide variety of acts that may have very different performance motives and constraints, Dickens's waxwork allows a perfect (because disembodied, and thus divorced from the wide range of specific personal circumstances) application of the argument.⁸⁵ The fact that the Byron model was formerly known as Mary seems to suggest an original or authentic identity. However, this ‘original’ is – as is theatrically manifest – a ‘fake’, merely an approximate representation which places the illusive ‘original’ at an even greater remove. The dramatic interchangeability of these waxy bodies privileges surface, exposing gender as “performative [in precisely Butler's terms] in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.”⁸⁶ The culturally encoded materials through which gender is read – the hair and clothes – are here exposed as nothing more than unsophisticated props, whilst the potentially endless re-dressing of the wax figures offers a physical model for the absence of an original, authentic gender.⁸⁷

⁸³ Andrew Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), p65. Page, p565. See chapter four for a more detailed exploration of Dickens's (and the wider cultural) awareness of Byron's diverse sexual practices.

⁸⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), p176.

⁸⁵ As Butler emphasises in the preface to *Bodies that Matter*, gender cannot just be “donned for the day, and then restored [. . .] to its place at night.” Since, in human acts, embodying gender is more than costume, it is necessary to complicate notions of drag and to “formulate a project that preserves gender practices as sites of critical agency” (px). Since *Gender Trouble* Butler has “distance[d] herself from the strategic deployment of ‘essential’ identity categories as a political practice”, expressing “doubts about the political efficacy of subverting dominant norms by occupying them” [Sara Salih (ed.), *The Judith Butler Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p9]. See Salih for a summary of the recent shifts in Butler's thought.

⁸⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p173.

⁸⁷ Dickens's denaturalisation of ascribed gender norms ties into his wider de-familiarisation of the human. As Herbert Sussman and Gerhard Joseph note in ‘Prefiguring the Post-Human: Dickens and Prosthesis’,

Lest such an interpretation only seems possible to a post-Butlerian reader, well versed in recent theories of performativity, it is worth noting that Dickens was not alone in his mid nineteenth-century scrutiny of ascribed gender roles. The explosion of conduct material at this time, which endeavoured to specify, label, and indirectly police appropriate behaviours for both men and women, exposes a deep anxiety about the ‘naturalness’ of what were promoted as ‘proper’ and innate gender roles.⁸⁸ Eliza Lynn Linton’s explication of ‘Womanliness’ neatly brings together prescriptions for the correct performance of mid-Victorian femininity:

A lady of refinement and culture [. . .] is womanly when she asserts her own dignity, womanly when her highest pride is her sweetest humility, the tenderest self-suppression; womanly when she protects the weaker; womanly when she submits to the stronger; to bear in silence and act with rigour [. . .] are alike the characteristics of true womanliness.

Linton insists further that “her womanliness inclines her to loving forbearance, to patience under difficulties, to unwearied cheerfulness.”⁸⁹ She advocates this ideal in response to what she sees as “the utmost confusion” surrounding conceptions of appropriate femininity during the upsurge of ‘first-wave’ feminism. However, Linton repeatedly acknowledges that the championed ideal is an artificial product of cultural conditioning:

She has *always been taught* that, as there are certain manly virtues so there Are certain feminine ones [. . .] She has *taken it to heart* that patience, self-sacrifice, tenderness, quietness [. . .] are the virtues more especially feminine; just as courage, justice and the like belong to men [. . .] She has *cultivated* all the meek and tender affections, all the unselfishness and

Victorian Literature and Culture, 32.2 (2004), pp617-628, the multiple cyborgian amalgams of Dickens’s fiction raise questions about authentic selfhood and what constitutes the human. They suggest that Dickens’s cyborgs “foreshadow the post-human dissolution of the unified human subject as self-acting monad with any sort of centralised control and agency” (p624). Sussman and Joseph build on Robert Newsom’s earlier reading of *Dombey and Son* as a novel that “focus[es] our attention on the body and questions about its integrity” [‘Embodying Dombey: Whole and in Part’, *Dickens Studies Annual*, 18 (1989), pp197-219, p203]. In this article Newsom infers a link between Dickens’s questioning of bodily coherence and his simultaneous “undermining [of] conventional expectations about the behaviour of men and women” (p209). Newsome concludes that “when it comes to gender, this novel likes to mix it up with a freedom that is [. . .] remarkable” (p211).

⁸⁸ See Deborah Gorham *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London and Canberra: Croom Helm, 1982) for details of the rapidly expanding market for such literature from the 1840s (preface and p65) and for a comprehensive survey of the plethora of advice texts regulating the behaviour of the Victorian girl from infancy to adolescence (part two).

⁸⁹ Eliza Lynn Linton, ‘Womanliness’, *Saturday Review*, 6 August 1870, XXX, pp166-168, p166, p168.

thought for others which have hitherto been the distinctive property of women (emphases added).⁹⁰

Men were similarly encouraged to internalise promoted patterns of appropriate masculinity. As Peter Stearns documents, “generalised images of toughness and the heroic fables urged on boys” were bolstered in mid nineteenth-century Britain by a range of “actual socialisation patterns”, including more gender distinct clothing, wig and body fashions, as well as a range of written conduct material, which “emphasised gender distinctions and the special emotional traits that differentiated boys from girls.”⁹¹ Endorsing a gendered split between two “separate characters”, John Ruskin specifies that “the man’s power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discover, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest.”⁹² There is a self-evident conflict between the teaching of ‘appropriate’ behaviours in such material and the continued attempt to assert the naturalness of ascribed gender norms. As Britta Zangen argues, gendered roles do “not seem to have come as naturally as the writers of manuals would have it. The fact that they wrote such manuals at all testifies to the opposite.”⁹³

Dickens’s exploration of the constructedness of gender then, ties into a wider cultural debate about the innateness of masculinity and femininity in which even those strongly advocating essentialist models inevitably betrayed their paradoxical anxiety that gendered characteristics need be taught and culturally enforced. Dickens’s particularly acute appreciation of the instability of gender is perhaps related to his familiarity with a wide range of theatrics. Castle has theorised that eighteenth-century writer, Henry Fielding (another favourite of Dickens), acquired an awareness of the artifice of gender roles through his dramatic background and personal experiences of acting. Castle examines Fielding’s fascinating novella *The Female Husband* (published anonymously in 1746, and not attributed to Fielding until the early twentieth century), a fictionalised account of Mary

⁹⁰ Ibid., p167.

⁹¹ Peter Stearns, *Be a Man: Males in Modern Society*, 2nd edn (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1990), p69, on changes in costume and body ideals see pp52-53.

⁹² John Ruskin, ‘Of Queens’ Gardens’ in *Sesame and Lilies* (1865, rpt. Orpington: George Allen, 1889), pp110-180, pp135-136.

⁹³ Britta Zangen, *Our Daughters Must be Wives: Marriageable Young Women in the Novels of Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2004), p46. Chapter two of this thesis further examines the prescribing of ‘normal’ gendered behaviours, analysing the internal ambivalence and contradiction in the arguments of foremost conduct writers, Dinah Craik and William Alger.

Hamilton, a sexual impersonator who passed so successfully that she was able to contract several marriages with women. Castle detects an “ideological tension in Fielding between his wish for ‘natural’ distinctions between the sexes – a theology of gender – and his countervailing, often enchanted, awareness of the theatricality and artifice of human sexual roles.”⁹⁴ She suggests that Fielding’s lifelong familiarity with the theatre and his own talent for acting contributed to his “pervasive awareness of the fluidity, the artificiality, of so much of what passes for immutable in human nature.”⁹⁵ A similar argument can be made for Dickens, who combined a well documented, emotionally intense relationship with the stage with a particularly developed awareness of social role play. An almost addictive theatre goer, Dickens famously only narrowly avoided an entirely different career as an actor after a bad cold obliged him to cancel his audition with the managers of Covent Garden.⁹⁶ This did not prevent him, however, from continuing to act throughout his life in elaborate amateur theatricals and in highly dramatic public readings. Even away from the stage, Dickens’s dramatic transitions from one persona to another marked him as a performance personality.⁹⁷ Thomas Carlyle described his friend in such terms - “Charlie you carry a whole company of actors under your hat.”⁹⁸

Dickens extended his appreciation of performance competence into his literary output. James Kincaid balances his exploration of the multiple performances enacted in Dickens’s fiction, with the observation that Dickens “often insists on essential selfhood.” However, this “hammering at essences” is everywhere undermined by the “unrestrained performances” of other figures, which “raise questions not only about linear plots but about the solidity of those trying to play a straight and clear part in them.”⁹⁹ Kincaid suggests that Dickens challenges the prevalent assumptions that performance operates as a temporary interruption of ‘real’ life, authorised by pre-set scripts: “Dickens questions these

⁹⁴ Terry Castle, ‘Matters Not Fit to be Mentioned: Fielding’s *The Female Husband*’, *ELH*, 49 (1982), pp602-622, p604.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p618.

⁹⁶ See Ackroyd, p140. For a summary of Dickens’s enthusiasm for amateur theatricals from his writing of a drama at age nine and the formation of his first ‘company’ at school to his stage management of an amateur play performed a week before his death, see *Oxford Reader’s Companion to Dickens*, ed. by Paul Schlicke, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), pp12-14. For discussion of Dickens’s reciprocal relationship with the stage see Grahame Smith, *Dickens and the Dream of Cinema* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2003), chapter six.

⁹⁷ Kaplan, *Dickens*, p535.

⁹⁸ Quoted by Kaplan, *ibid.*, p536.

⁹⁹ James Kincaid, ‘Performance, Roles and the Nature of the Self in Dickens’, in *Dramatic Dickens*, ed. by Carol Hanbery MacKay (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), pp11-26, p18, p14.

notions of selfhood as an isolated and solid entity, that the lines between performers and performances, roles and role-players are often blurred.”¹⁰⁰ Kincaid’s observations have clear repercussions for Dickens’s theatrical undermining of received gender and sexual roles. Helena Michie has argued for Dickens’s denaturalisation of the family through the domestic theatre of *Nicholas Nickleby*:

The Crummleses, after all, are a family company, their relations to each other are as orchestrated as their productions on stage. Crummles’s admiration of his wife and his amazement at the talents of the Infant Phenomenon are of course part of his repertoire. Similarly, the ‘theatrical wedding’ that joins Lillyvick and Miss Petowker suggests a continuum between married life and theatre; indeed many of the marriages in this text are performances à deux.¹⁰¹

In the exaggerated dramatisation of these unions, Dickens undermines what are seen to be the sacrosanct ideals of his fiction: domesticity, marriage and reproductive heterosexual desire. Mr Crummles’s theatrical response to his wife and daughter, for example, exposes the constructedness of what are usually seen as the ‘natural’ family values of Dickens’s canon.

“What can you two be together?” – More than an Isolated ‘Case’

Across his fiction Dickens interrogates (if sometimes ambivalently) the relationship between biological sex, ascribed gender and sexual desire. *Little Dorrit*’s participation in this much broader fictional dialogue prevents Miss Wade from being an isolated case. Indeed, Miss Wade’s specific circumstances are considered in earlier and later Dickens novels. These continuities have previously been entirely overlooked, allowing Miss Wade to appear as a shady misfit, unrepresentative of Dickens’s broader fictional interests.

There is a danger that even those sustained explorations of Miss Wade’s homosexual desire will fail to incite a re-evaluation of Dickens’s work. Miss Wade’s sexuality when considered in isolation can too easily be refigured as something else (Retseck, for example, reconfigures sexual transgression as political rebellion, whilst Heatley transfigures

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p12.

¹⁰¹ Helena Michie, ‘The Avuncular and Beyond: Family (melo)drama in *Nicholas Nickleby*’ in *Dickens Refigured: Bodies, Desires and Other Histories*, ed. by John Schad (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1996), pp80-97, p94.

seduction into mesmeric will), or simply dismissed as a bizarre anomaly. The marginalisation of Miss Wade's significance has received support from the novel's structure and from its composition history. Dickens's difficulty in incorporating Miss Wade's narrative, despite his unremitting sense of her importance throughout planning and writing, was partially resolved by his positioning of her history in a separate chapter.¹⁰² However, John Forster was unconvinced by this move, and still "had trouble locating the significance of her narrative within the novel's larger pattern."¹⁰³ As Wilson notes, Forster's early dismissal of Miss Wade is still re-enacted in current responses to the character: "Forster inaugurates a critical tradition of discomfort in suggesting excision of what he called 'the least interesting part of the novel.'"¹⁰⁴

This section contends that Miss Wade's significance is much greater than that of a "minor character in a single Victorian novel" (as Jagose calls her), by repositioning her within the Dickens canon and allowing the articulation of her intense female relationships to resonate with Dickens's exploration of passionate bonds between women throughout his literary career.¹⁰⁵ Significantly, those questions about Miss Wade that are often interpreted as most openly raising "the question of female homosexuality as cultural concept for Victorian readers" are not exclusive to this relationship.¹⁰⁶ Michael Slater has interpreted Mr Meagles's unspecified suspicion – "What can you two be together? What can come of it" (p322) – as homoerotically suggestive.¹⁰⁷ Jagose similarly argues that Mr Meagles's "very question gives substance to some allegedly unimaginable social order, a counter to the idealised form of femininity and the [traditional] narratives of family life."¹⁰⁸ Mr Meagles's suggestive language, however, has a close precursor in the earlier novel, *Bleak House* (1853) in Esther's account of the brick-makers' wives:

I thought it very touching to see these two women, coarse and shabby and

¹⁰² In planning Dickens repeatedly questioned the feasibility of introducing Miss Wade's full history earlier. He considered positioning it in number 3, 4, 6 & 7 of the serial publication, before finally placing it in number eight [*Dickens's Working Notes for His Novels*, ed. by Harry Stone (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987)]. Wilson examines this troubled construction, observing that Dickens's "outline for the original serialisation is studded with the repeated note 'Miss Wade? No!!'" (p188).

¹⁰³ Piya Pal Lapinski, 'Dickens's Miss Wade and J. S. LeFanu's Carmilla: The Female Vampire in *Little Dorrit*', *Dickens Quarterly*, 11.2 (1994), pp81-87, p81.

¹⁰⁴ Wilson, p188.

¹⁰⁵ Jagose, 'Remembering Miss Wade', p427.

¹⁰⁶ Wilson, p189.

¹⁰⁷ Discussion at Birkbeck College's 'Dickens Day' on *Little Dorrit*, London, September 2002.

¹⁰⁸ 'Remembering Miss Wade', p432.

beaten, so united; to see *what they could be to one another*; to see how they felt for one another; how the heart of each to each was softened by the hard trials of their lives (emphasis added).¹⁰⁹

Esther's observation of the mutual support between Jenny and her companion, "who had brought such consolation with her" (p135), demonstrates that Dickens first used the phrase to indicate the ultimately supportive love of female friends, whose dedication to one another both improves their likelihood of survival and provides the only joy of such a life. The gentle physical intimacy of Jenny and her unnamed consoler directly contrasts to the physical abuse that their husbands' administer:

An ugly woman, very poorly clothed, hurried in [. . .] and coming straight up to the mother, said, 'Jenny! Jenny!' The mother rose on being so addressed and fell upon the woman's neck.

She had also upon her face and arms the marks of ill usage [. . .] but when she condoled with the woman, and her own tears fell, she wanted no beauty. I say condoled, but her only words were 'Jenny! Jenny!' All the rest was in the tone in which she said them (p134).

The absolute tenderness of this depiction demonstrates that what these women are to one another is very different from what Miss Wade is to Harriet. However, the multiple similarities between the two pairings position them on the same spectrum of intense and exclusive female relationship. The bond of shared circumstance exists in both pairings, Miss Wade insists that her intimacy with Harriet "is founded in a common cause [. . .] Her wrong is my wrong" (p322). Both relationships represent an attempt to transcend and escape the containing, and physically regulating space of the male dominated family, resisting its structures through a transfer of affection from the permissible sites of husband/father/employer to female companion.

In *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), Abbey Potterson offers Lizzie Hexam a similar exit from her father's home and control, by inviting her to live with and work for her in the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters, Miss Abbey's pub. This dual proposal of female cohabitation and financial support is structured very similarly to Miss Wade's position with Harriet. Miss Wade's description of Harriet as "taking refuge" with her (p319) is echoed in Miss

¹⁰⁹ Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (London: Penguin, 1996), pp134-135. All further references are to this edition and are given in parentheses within the text.

Potterson's use of the same term: "[I] tried to persuade her to come to me for a refuge."¹¹⁰ Abbey's evident and peculiar favouritism to Lizzie, and her corresponding wish to spare Lizzie's father on her behalf, incites the resentment of the self-serving Rogue Riderhood: "Who's he, to be favoured along of his daughter? Ain't I got a daughter of my own!" (p72). Importantly, Abbey's preference for Lizzie, like Miss Wade's for Harriet, is explicitly based on an initial physical attraction:

'I vow and declare I am half ashamed of myself for taking such an interest in you,' said Miss Abbey, pettishly, 'for I don't believe I should do it if you were not good-looking. Why ain't you ugly?' (p75).

The overtly physical catalyst for Abbey's offer of an increased intimacy with Lizzie is further clarified:

'No matter whether it's owing to your good looks or not, I like you and I want to serve you. Lizzie, come under my direction. Don't fling yourself away, my girl' (p75).

The introduction of this possessive term is preparatory to the information that during this entreaty Miss Potterson "had even drawn her arm round the girl's waist" (p75), the same move that Miss Wade makes on Harriet "as if she took possession of her for evermore" (p322). The "motifs of dishevelled hair and self-inflicted injury" that Geoffrey Carter identifies as characteristic of the scenes between Miss Wade and Harriet, are visible referents in Abbey Potterson's involvement with Lizzie.¹¹¹ Abbey's servants note her dissatisfaction at Lizzie's rejection through the unusual phrase "Missis had had her hair combed the wrong way by somebody" (p76) and there is a sado-masochistic dynamic in Abbey's shutting out of Lizzie:

There was a sound of casting-out, in the rattling of the iron-links, and the grating of the bolts and staples under Miss Abbey's hand (p76).

The suffering underlying Abbey Potterson's firm repulse of Lizzie, having become "frigid" after the young woman's rejection of her offer, is expressed through her inability to eat (p73) and a suggestion of self harm in the choice of the term "grating." Lizzie's refusal of

¹¹⁰ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (London: Penguin, 1997), p435. All further references are to this edition and are given in parentheses within the text.

¹¹¹ Geoffrey Carter, 'Sexuality and the Victorian Artist, Dickens and Swinburne' in *Sexuality and Victorian Literature*, ed. by Richard Cox (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1984), pp141-160, p145. Abbey's most explicit hair fascination is expressed in her excited response to Jenny Wren's tresses: "'Why, what lovely hair! [. . .] And enough to make wigs for all the dolls in the world. What a quantity!' [. . .] Miss Abbey's admiration seemed to increase her perplexity" (p434).

Abbey's help continues to pain her long afterwards, and she responds "rather angrily" to a visit on Lizzie's behalf – "Lizzie Hexam is a very proud young woman" (p433).

The level of similarity in these comparable offers of independent female co-operation and cohabitation demonstrates the inaccuracy of positioning Miss Wade as an anomaly. Her intense female relationships are better understood as belonging to a series of coherent representations of desire between women in Dickens's novels. In such clearly marked overlaps between his female homoerotic pairings, Dickens emphasises the diversity of same-sex desire. He establishes a spectrum that ranges from the tender, life-supporting physicality of the brick-makers' wives in *Bleak House* to Miss Wade's jealous and destructive homoerotic desires.

The comparability of the all-female refuges offered by these relationships invites a broader de-pathologising of same-sex desire. Although Miss Wade apparently introduces delusions and paranoia into her relationships, the overlaps between her experience and that of more positive female pairings positions her on a continuum, in which female homoerotics are by no means necessarily pathological, and are often the opposite – sustaining, life-affirming strategies for survival. All existing work on Miss Wade's homoerotics presupposes Dickens's disapproving containment of this aberrant desire and posits the pathologising of Miss Wade as the authorial mechanism of regulation. Jagose reads Miss Wade through discourses of disease and Wilson employs contemporary understandings of female madness and hysteria, relating this to Miss Wade's mentally destabilising profession as governess:

Another way of understanding Tattycoram and Miss Wade is as lunatics under treatment [. . .] The narrative pathologises Miss Wade, a process that subsequent critical readings only repeat and intensify.¹¹²

Mary Armstrong more explicitly adopts a similar insistence that Dickens manages the spectre of the female homoerotic through consistent pathologising. Armstrong reads the 'History' as "establish[ing] Wade's words and actions as arising from a determinedly false perception of the world [. . .] We can also detect in Miss Wade's pathology an early glimpse of what will evolve, some twenty or thirty years later, into a burgeoning, heavily

¹¹² Wilson, p193.

medicalised ‘understanding’ of female homoerotic desire. Miss Wade is [. . .] a kind of half-invert.”¹¹³

A return to the ‘History of a Self Tormenter’ raises questions about the retrospective critical assumptions that structure interpretations of Miss Wade under the sexological categories of paranoia (a term, as Armstrong uncomfortably acknowledges, no less a neologism than ‘lesbian’) and mental illness. Like M. E. Braddon’s later creation, Lady Audley, Miss Wade’s secret may ultimately be that she is too sane – too savvy to the constricting social structures that demand a female subordination that she refuses to perform. Miss Wade logically rejects the hierarchical organisation of gendered power, critiquing the prejudice towards illegitimacy. Her conceptions of employment as a governess as a form of genteel slavery – “Did she presume on my birth, or on my hire?” (p642) – and marriage as a form of legalised prostitution, are too coherent with contemporary debates to be entirely dismissed as delusional ravings. Her suspicion that her first suitor may have “bought [her] for [her] looks” (p639), and “gone into a slave-market and purchased a wife” (p642) preserves her from the potential fate of trophy wife, which Pet Meagles must endure in this novel as Minne Gowan. Far from being a collection of unsubstantiated paranoia, Miss Wade’s anxieties are often played out in the living subjection of other women both in this novel, and in Dickens’s contemporary society.

It is hoped that this positioning of Miss Wade within a homoerotic continuum will contribute to a radical reassessment of the relationship between female homoerotic desire and evil. Armstrong makes the disturbingly convincing suggestion that the ‘lesbian’ label is so often appended to Miss Wade, in sharp distinction to the absence of corresponding analysis of any other female figure in Dickens, because “she simply fits most agreeably into a larger, long-established perception within which women who desire other women are evil and diseased.” Armstrong boldly holds open “the possibility that Miss Wade exhibits no more intensity of female-female desire than, say, Esther Summerson, but is labelled a lesbian by Dickensians because she alone is ‘negative’ enough [. . .] evil enough, to deserve the title.”¹¹⁴ By identifying a homoerotic impetus across a much broader range of

¹¹³ Armstrong, ‘What can you two be together?’, pp264-266.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p227.

Dickens's fiction than Armstrong's project covers, this thesis endeavours to counter such homophobic impulses.

Vanquishing Miss Wade? Readerly Competence and Dickens's Cross-Textual Strategies

The denouement of *Little Dorrit* with Harriet's return to more conventional domestic life and her denunciation of Miss Wade to the Meagles family as she begs to be given back "the dear old name" (p772), suggests a vanquishing of Miss Wade and a return to heterosexual, patriarchal structures. However, over the continuing Dickens canon, it becomes clear that the erotic alternative of interdependent female cohabitation is a space of possibility that remains open throughout the corpus, despite the ostensible closure of *Little Dorrit*. That such possibilities are available throughout Dickens's career is made clear in Miss Potterson's desiring proposal to Lizzie, the linguistic overlap unmistakeably recalling Miss Wade's offer.

The inter-textual emphasis on multiple Dickens works in this thesis challenges the ongoing critical reliance on the apparent linearity of the novel form, which structures Roof's belief in a "reproductive narrative trajectory" and Armstrong's insistence on Dickens's heterosexual recovery. Both theorists are seduced into an unsophisticated but familiar critical belief that a novel's last chapter contains its author's final word. This thesis rejects the popular emphasis on plot integrity and the corresponding over-evaluation of the significance of conclusion. Instead, it contends that Dickens's proliferate output challenges and distorts the linearity of narrative space, with his frequent reworking of elements of previous novels providing multi-dimensionality to the form. Revisiting the most homoerotic scenes, structures and scenarios across his fictional career, this project will contend that Dickens's work emphasises those reiterated motifs and escapes what is usually perceived as inevitable linearity and closure.

The drive towards visibility through recurrence will be considered throughout this project. Such reiterations evince Dickens's career-long concern with homoerotic intimacy and bespeak an impulse in the fiction to give prominence to covertly articulated same-sex bonds through repetition. In its inter-textual methodology this thesis seeks not only to prevent the

significance of arguments from being restricted to a single novel, it also aims to elaborate a particular strategy in Dickens's work through which he prevented homoerotic articulation from being stifled by ostensibly respectable closure.

Through motif repetition Dickens educates his regular readers to bring a particular 'expectation' and 'competence' for homoerotic interpretation accumulated from their experience of particular scenarios in his other novels. Such specific instances of readers' accumulated literary competence repeat in a highly particularised form the wider process of readerly understanding. Jonathan Culler has suggested that a text "has meaning only with respect to a system of conventions which the reader has assimilated": "Certain expectations [. . .] guide the interpretive process and impose severe limitations on the set of acceptable or plausible meanings."¹¹⁵ In Roland Barthes's wider concept of the 'already read' every individual's possible interpretation of a text is dependent on the logic of their previous experience, "the already-seen, the already-read, the already-done": "This 'I' which approaches the text is already itself a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite."¹¹⁶

Whilst the work of both theorists is enabling to this thesis's approach to repetitive cumulative understanding, their general claims for readerly cognisance are less applicable to specific instances. The 'conventions' and 'expectations' that readers bring to texts remain homogenous in Culler's theory; he does not account for a hierarchy of expectation, in which particular anticipated meanings have ascendancy. Similarly, Barthes does not distinguish between experiences of the 'already-read', according equal significance to every aspect of a reader's prior experience. This thesis contends that in Dickens's reiteration of specific plot motifs, he caused his regular readers to accord greater significance to those elements of a novel that they had previously encountered in his other works. Through repetitions of particular homoerotic scenarios and relationship configurations in Dickens's fiction, a series of motifs are established as conventions for articulating same sex desire.

¹¹⁵ Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p116, p127.

¹¹⁶ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (first published in French 1973, rpt. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p82, p10.

This establishment of a series of cross-textual homoerotic articulations is an especially effective strategy for an author who can boast a loyal following of regular readers. George Ford documents that by the time Dickens wrote *David Copperfield* he had “acquired a reliable following of book buyers.” Ford describes the Oxbridge undergraduates of the 1850s “who soaked themselves in his work to such an extent that their detailed knowledge was enough to stagger Dickens himself.”¹¹⁷ Dickens was similarly admired by large numbers of working-class people, as much anecdotal evidence attests.¹¹⁸ Dickens recalled the thanks given after a charity reading by an Irish workman: “Not only for the light you’ve been to me this night, but for the light you’ve been in me house sir [. . .] this many a long year.”¹¹⁹ A similar account of a prolonged, intimate encounter with Dickens’s fiction was given by a lady who “stopped him in the street and said, ‘Mr Dickens, will you let me touch the hand that has filled my house with many friends.’”¹²⁰ As Richard Altick observes, from the mid-1830s “English readers began to resume the habit of buying books rather than borrowing [. . .] Dickens’s novels, unlike run-of-the-mine fiction, were books to be kept on the household shelf, to be read over and over again.”¹²¹

Amy Cruse uncovers a wealth of instances in which Victorian diarists and autobiographers used Dickens’s characters to conceptualise their own experiences. Cruse quotes Francis Barnard’s perception of his nursery governess as “a Cornelia Blimber” and his description of his severe childhood illness as a time when he “acted Paul Dombey to the life.” She suggests that “some of the younger Victorians grew up in such close familiarity with the Dickens people that these became their intimate life companions, meeting them at every turn of the road.”¹²² That such close, if not always comfortable, relationships with Dickens’s fiction continued well beyond the nineteenth century is suggested by texts such as Henry Green’s *Living* (1929) in which Mr Craigan compulsively reads the works of Dickens “over and over again” and Evelyn Waugh’s short story ‘The Man Who Liked

¹¹⁷ George Ford, *Dickens and His Readers* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1955), p76.

¹¹⁸ As Ford acknowledges, it is impossible to accurately estimate the significant number of working-class devotees to Dickens, who probably formed “the largest group among these loyal early Dickensians” (p77). For sales figures demonstrating Dickens’s unprecedented popularity see Zangen, pp85-87.

¹¹⁹ Quoted by Ford, p78.

¹²⁰ Amy Cruse, *The Victorians and Their Books* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1935), p172.

¹²¹ Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1957), p280.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p171.

Dickens' (1933), with its compulsive retelling of Dickens for survival.¹²³ These dramatic accounts reflect a wider practice of repetitive, cumulative reading experience of Dickens which persists to date. In his preface to Barthes's *S/Z*, Richard Howard quotes an interviewee's response when asked about her reading habits and preferences: "I don't read novels any more, I'm sorry to say [. . .] When I do, I go back to the ones I've read before. Dickens. Balzac."¹²⁴

Rising levels of literacy and Dickens's experiments with a variety of methods of cheap publication allowed his novels to reach an unusually large first audience.¹²⁵ Dickens strove to reach the widest possible readership, simultaneously stimulating sales and encouraging a perception of his output as a whole product through reissue in collected editions. Dickens explicitly presented the collected Cheap Edition as a means of becoming "a permanent inmate of many English homes where, in his old shape, he was only known as a guest."¹²⁶ A large variety of editions of Dickens's complete works, ranging widely in price, were published throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, encouraging the perception of a total Dickens canon. For the many avid readers with access to the collected Dickens package, Dickens's cross-textual allusions would not have gone unnoticed.

Dickens's reiteration of the relationship between Miss Wade and Harriet Beadle in a variety of parallel mappings is representative of his constant reworking of same-sex attachments across his fiction. The many regular and repetitive readers of Dickens would have been in a strong position to recognise these overlaps. Thus, whilst this chapter treats Miss Wade as an exemplary 'case', it seeks to demonstrate simultaneously that this is a case that Dickens will not allow his readers to close.

¹²³ For a fuller account of *Living* see Ford, p174. Waugh replicated this compulsion to retell, including an adapted version of this story in *A Handful of Dust* (1934).

¹²⁴ Richard Howard, introduction to Roland Barthes, *SZ*, pviii.

¹²⁵ See Zangen for literacy figures, p83.

¹²⁶ Announcement of the Cheap Edition, 1847, quoted by Ackroyd, p529.

Chapter Two

Marriage and Its Discontents

At the centenary of Dickens's death, Margaret Lane sought to define and describe the ever-powerful phenomenon of Dickensian domesticity, with which Dickens is still so firmly associated in the critical imagination:

At the beginning of his career as a writer, Dickens developed a descriptive speciality which was quickly accepted as a personal trademark: the cosy, contented, cheerful, sheltering middle class home. This vision of a highly moral and unpretentious domestic happiness which is both a goal in life and a cure for all its ills, appears fleetingly even in the early sketches by Boz.¹

Lane presents Dickens's domestic idyll as a stable, recurrent entity, categorised by the apparently essential ingredients of "cleanliness, domestic order and efficiency, the little woman, a troop of happy and untroublesome children [. . .] – these are the essential scenery; the focus of the well-set stage is invariably the fire."² However, as Lane goes on to provide examples of such hearthside intimacies, she introduces (apparently unknowingly) a diversity for which her insistently familial and heterosexual model fails to account. In order to exemplify the centrality of hearth to the idealised family home, Lane details "the enveloping warmth of that confidential fireside" shared by the two bachelor barristers of *Our Mutual Friend*.³ She seems entirely unaware that the domestic comforts and home confidences of Eugene Wrayburn and Mortimer Lightwood are strongly at variance with the vehemently reproductive model household (with its "troops" of children), that she believes to be so characteristic of Dickens. The comfortable inclusion of this pair within a domestic reading gives the lie to another traditional formulation of Dickensian domesticity by Alexander Welsh: "Presiding over each hearth is a cheerful female eidolon."⁴ This chapter argues that the shared comfort, warmth and intimacy between Eugene and Mortimer *does* qualify them for inclusion within Dickens's idyll of home; it is the critical definition of the domestic paradigm that requires radical reconfiguration.

¹ Margaret Lane, 'Dickens on the Hearth' in *Dickens 1970: Centenary Essays*, ed. by Michael Slater (London: Chapman and Hall, 1970), pp153-172, p153.

² *Ibid.*, p160.

³ *Ibid.*, p163.

⁴ Alexander Welsh, *The City of Dickens* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), p150.

Lane's critical slip usefully exposes the fundamental slippage in Dickens's work between a valorisation of the 'traditional' heterosexual family and the idealisation of alternative intimacies and life choices. Sally Ledger opens a space for such divergent groupings, recognising a "series of alternative domestic units" (such as Fagin's gang, Sleary's circus, Wemmick's castle, David Copperfield's surrogate parenting by the Micawbers and later by Aunt Betsy and Mr Dick) that offset and offer refuge from "the broken and dysfunctional families which litter the pages of Dickens's fiction."⁵ This section revisits the critical contortions over Dickens's paradoxical destruction of the familial exemplar he has been supposed to enshrine, questioning the tenacious scholarly insistence on this domestic ideal, and exploring the conflict between such a model and Dickens's interest in, and idealisation of, alternative patterns of household. The chapter seeks to reconfigure the domestic spaces of Dickens's fiction, through attention to his celebration of intense same-sex relationships and life-styles, such as bachelorhood, that preclude participation in the 'typical' family. Focusing on Dickens's representation and valorisation of a range of non-normative family units, from the hetero-resistant to the explicitly homoerotic, it is argued that Dickens's repeated disruption of the domestic paradigm exposes his rejection of the conventional family as an inappropriate structure that failed to meet the emotional, erotic and domestic needs of his society. Both this and the following chapter interrogate Dickens's perceived complicity with hegemonic, restrictive models of the Victorian family.

Whilst celebrations of blissful bachelorhood are identified as a primary strategy for Dickens's articulation of male resistances to the dominant ideology of responsible connubial and reproductive fulfilment, the immense gendered differential between Victorian perceptions and treatments of single men and unmarried women requires alternative methods to express female divergence from the marital norm. As Joseph Boone has argued, "the counter-traditionally spirited novelist could not ignore the fact that any fictionalised 'liberation' of the female protagonist from the prison of matrimonial destiny marked, at least in the eyes of society, her enclosure within a more imprisoning role as 'old maid', condemned to solitary survival."⁶ Whilst "for men, the choice not only of whom to marry but whether to marry at all has been a traditional privilege", the single status of

⁵ Sally Ledger, 'Domesticity', *Companion*, p191.

⁶ Joseph Allen Boone, *Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1987), p280.

women in the nineteenth century was “transformed into a condition of unfortunate circumstance and constriction.”⁷ This chapter both acknowledges the continued presence of independent and unconstricted single women across Dickens’s fiction, and explores Dickens’s wider representation of female resistances to connubial domesticity from within ostensibly conventional plots of courtship and marriage. Particular scrutiny is given to the marital opposition effected by Dickens’s eroticisation of female ‘romantic’ friendship.

Through gender-nuanced readings of marital resistance, this chapter elucidates the benefits of including both male and female same-sex desire within a single project. Attention to the very different strategies through which Dickens presents male and female homoerotics allows for a full exploration of his gendered articulations of same-sex desire, without obscuring the significant social, emotional and erotic differences between male and female desiring experiences.

The Ideal Home: Whose Idyll?

Marriage is generally the origin of the elementary community of which larger communities [. . .] and ultimately the nation are constituted and on the conjugal state of the population, its existence, increase and diffusion, as well as manners, character, happiness and freedom ultimately depend.

Registrar General, Introduction to the Census, 1851.

Historians broadly agree that the nineteenth century witnessed an enormous increase in the importance placed on a particular ideal of a ‘sexually responsible’ home life structured around marriage – *the* social institution around which households were arranged. A model emerged of “the standard family with adult male breadwinner and a non-waged housewife/mother only employed in childcare and housework (also a word coined in this period).”⁸ There is a consensus that the major impetus for Victorian domestic ideology derived from powerful counter movements, notably Evangelical and Malthusian, to “a new and almost unprecedented era of aristocratic debauchery” at the end of the eighteenth

⁷ Ibid., pp278-279.

⁸ Leonore Davidoff, Megan Doolittle, Janet Fink, Katherine Holden, *The Family Story: Blood, Contract and Intimacy 1830-1860* (London and New York: Longman, 1999), p105.

century.⁹ The perceived need for “a new seriousness and respectability in life” which would begin at home was given urgency by the combination of domestic political instability and the French Revolution:¹⁰

Sexual collapse seemed the necessary path of social revolution, sexual and Family decorum a vital part of social stability [. . .] In all social discourse a stable home was seen both as a microcosm of stable society and a sanctuary from an unstable and rapidly changing one.¹¹

The ideal conjugal home was to act as a bulwark against the rapid changes of accelerating industrialisation and urbanisation “along with continuing political unrest, the exigencies of poverty, brutality, pressing sexuality, disease and death.”¹²

As central to the standard home model, marriage was increasingly perceived to be compulsory as domestic ideology proliferated. John Gillis has explored this “compulsion to marry” and the corresponding “mass return to legal marriage” in the mid-Victorian period, describing this as “the era of mandatory marriage”:¹³

Marriage became increasingly the gateway to respectability and stability. It was buttressed by an increasing idealisation of domesticity, a growing specification and rationalisation in the censure of extra-marital sex (partly articulated by what one sex reformer called ‘the continued extension of the criminal law’) and by the difficulty of divorce.¹⁴

As the utopic rhetoric of the 1851 census suggests, marriage was positioned as “the economic and social building block for the middle class; it was the basis of a new family unit.”¹⁵

⁹ Roy Porter and Lesley Hall, *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain, 1650-1950* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1995), p126.

¹⁰ Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p77. Hall’s chapter on ‘The Early Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology’ focuses on the Evangelical project to transform national morality in response to aristocratic laxness and domestic political weakness.

¹¹ Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, pp27-29.

¹² Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1790-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), p357. Further references are to this edition unless otherwise specified.

¹³ John Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages 1600 to the Present* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1985), p231.

¹⁴ Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p24.

¹⁵ Davidoff and Hall, p322.

In the recent revised edition of *Family Fortunes* Davidoff and Hall retracted their original claim that “domesticity was specifically middle class.”¹⁶ This qualification is also appropriate for this study given Dickens’s exploration of a wide range of domestic (dys)function across a broad social spectrum. Take, for instance, the impressive class range of domestic disharmony in *Barnaby Rudge* (1841). In this novel unhappy wedlock exhibits no social prejudice, similarly affecting the working woman, Mrs Rudge, who is forced to flee her murderous husband, the respectable middle-class marriage of the Vardens (Mrs Varden’s “uncertain temper” and “capricious nature” towards her husband are finally only disciplined by the violence of the riots, p63), and Edward Chester of “the politest and best circles”, who marries for money, whilst his wife fulfils her father’s “heart’s desire” by marrying for “good family” (pp133-134).

The historical, political and religious contributions to marital domestic ideology are deliberately outlined in the broadest possible brushstrokes, as the latest approaches to ‘the Victorian family’ suggest that this constraining singular label should be abandoned in favour of examining the multiplicity and diversity of families during this period. Even the recent Heinemann children’s reference book about *Victorian Family Life* opens with a statement of familial variety: “What was family life like during the reign of Queen Victoria? There were lots of different sorts of families.”¹⁷ This attention to diversity offers a timely attempt to circumvent the narrowness of previous formulations, and create a space for those households and relationships which had received no attention under a rigid understanding of what constitutes family:

The family of the past has been seen as a white English family, loaded with traditional English values which elevate the privacy of the home, romantic love as the basis of marriage, and strict but kindly childrearing.¹⁸

In an important corrective to the belief in a monolithic Victorian family model, George Behlmer has argued that “this reputed golden age of domesticity saw intense if inconclusive combat over the meaning of family and home.”¹⁹ Davidoff et al suggest similarly that “the meanings and values attached to family even within the same group could be varied and

¹⁶ Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1790-1850*, revised edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pxxxi.

¹⁷ Jane Shuter, *Victorian Family Life* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1997), p3.

¹⁸ Davidoff et al, p19.

¹⁹ George Behlmer, *Friends of the Family: The English Home and its Guardians, 1850-1940* (Stamford: Stamford UP, 1998), p3.

often contradictory. The model of family harmony was in tension with more radical ideas about familial relations such as the beliefs of Owenite socialists.”²⁰ Demographers have noted the smallness of the proportion of households that actually conformed to a nuclear model, which has been retrospectively reified as the standard model of the period despite never having been a statistical norm: “A household [. . .] frequently sheltered individuals beyond the nuclear family core – servants, apprentices and lodgers, not to mention distant kin. In 1851, just thirty-six percent of households contained a married couple, at least one child, and no one else.”²¹ The ‘typical’ family then, was neither a statistical majority nor an unchallenged ideal.

Various writers have gestured suggestively to the kinds of investments modern readers may have in maintaining a fantasy of idyllic family stability, anchored by the wider illusion that the mid nineteenth century constituted the hey-day of domesticity. Davidoff et al, for example, point to the yearning for psychical reassurance that impels “an ongoing search for a golden age of stable, loving and supportive families upon which to model hopes and dreams for ourselves and future generations.”²² The blindness to the complexity of domestic experience which results from such yearnings is perhaps most clearly manifested in popular misconceptions of Dickens as the foremost champion of hearth and home. The belief that Dickens straight-forwardly reflects contemporary ideals of home life is everywhere challenged in his fiction. Take, as an exemplary vignette, the playful adaptation in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) of the popular ballad ‘Home Sweet Home’, which historians have described as almost an alternative national anthem, central to the domestic investments of this period.²³ Dickens misquotes and subverts this culturally resonant extolment of home comforts, rejecting the word “homely” in favour of “ghastly” to describe the bizarre dwelling of Mr Venus, a taxidermist and articulator of bones: “Home, Home, Home, sweet Home! - Be it ever [. . .] ever so ghastly, all things considered there’s no place like it” (p421).

Richard Barickman et al neatly distinguish the disparity between Dickens’s actual familial representations and the wider, shared cultural memory of his fiction:

²⁰ Davidoff et al, p101.

²¹ Behlmer, p26.

²² Davidoff et al, p3.

²³ For the central place of this song (composed 1823) in domestic ideology see Davidoff and Hall, p360.

The pitifully few happy families that exist in Dickens's novels have exerted such influence over the imagination of some readers that he is often remembered as the supreme expositor of the Victorian domestic idyll.²⁴

The readerly insistence on Dickensian domestic harmony demonstrates the way in which a selective reading of Dickens's fiction has become a central tenet in modern fantasies of the stable Victorian family. Such positionings of Dickens (as shown in the heritage industry's efforts to sanitise and domesticate their presentation of this author, discussed in the introduction) are intimately related to national and cultural investments. Eminent Dickensian, Michael Slater, insists that "Dickens was, in his idealisation of 'hearth and home' and the family circle, very much a man of his age, an age when the British monarchy under Victoria and Albert was reconstituted as a highly domestic institution [. . .] Through the very nature of his books, Dickens was in himself a remarkable intensifier of the cult of domesticity."²⁵ Slater has laboured to prevent the Dickensian ideal of home from being displaced even by those competing, much more detailed and fully realised explorations of familial strife and domestic disaster that appear within the same fictions:

He is writing novels not idylls and needs dynamic subject-matter, struggles, stresses and tensions to be worked out and resolved during the course of the story. What he mainly gives us, therefore, are domestic situations where the ideal is somehow perverted or betrayed or prevented from being realised.²⁶

As Catherine Waters observes, "any close examination" of Dickens's fiction "reveals a remarkable disjunction between his image as the quintessential celebrant of hearth, and his interest in fractured families."²⁷ None-the-less Waters reiterates Slater's conventional position, refusing to de-centre Dickens from his place in family ideology; she sees the multiple instances of deviance as "underwritten" by an unarticulated ideal. Through this argument, conventional domesticity reigns whether it is present or not, as any aberrance is

²⁴ Richard Barickman, Susan MacDonald, and Myra Stark, *Corrupt Relations: Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Collins and the Victorian Sexual System* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), p61.

²⁵ Michael Slater, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Dickens* (Duckworth: London, 1999), p93.

²⁶ Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women* (London: Dent, 1983), p335. Even Margaret Lane's glowing valorisation of the domestic idyll, must reluctantly acknowledge that "an attentive reading [. . .] discovers a wry observation of domestic life in general, and of connubial happiness in particular, a long way removed from the coy relish of the celebrated domestic set pieces" (p154).

²⁷ Catherine Waters, *Dickens and the Politics of the Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), p15. See Waters for a thorough listing of the critical positioning of family as "a Dickensian speciality" from the nineteenth century on (p2, p15).

seen as fulfilling a disciplinary purpose as part of “the normalising function of middle-class domestic ideology in Dickens’s fiction.”²⁸

Behlmer’s provocative questioning of the stubbornness of the domestic dream in recent historical thought can be usefully applied here:

How one wonders, if ‘family’ was so variously understood, defined, and lived, can commentators be so categorical in their pronouncements on the ‘decline’ of the nuclear family or the erosion of ‘traditional family values’? On what basis do they presume that a golden age of family autonomy once existed?²⁹

Through its attention to Dickens’s positive representations of families that depart from the supposed ‘standard’ model, this thesis seeks to open a space in which the widespread fantasy of an exclusively marital and reproductive Dickensian domesticity can be similarly questioned.

Although much more rarely than has been imagined, Dickens does of course celebrate some households (like that of the Cratchits in *A Christmas Carol*, 1843 and the Plornishes in *Little Dorrit*, 1857) that do (almost) cohere with a ‘normative’, narrow family model.³⁰ Within this broader context of diversity, these families figure as just one part of Dickens’s attention to a wide range of various familial experiences. As Barickman et al discover, however, the endeavour to list examples of Dickens’s happy families is immediately problematic: “The few beleaguered enclaves of domestic harmony that do survive do not quite merit all the narrative glow that suffuses them. Quite simply, something is always wrong with them.”³¹ Whilst the gentle glow of these rare domestic (almost) conventional hearth-sides is diminished by deficiency or aberrance within, it pales further beside the

²⁸ Ibid., p27.

²⁹ Behlmer, p26.

³⁰ Despite their infrequency, Dickens’s representations of an ideal home have been attributed to his canny commercial exploitation of the “twin teloi of domesticity and popularity” [Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), p95]. Mary Poovey’s exploration of Dickens’s expert production and manipulation of “an iconography of ‘Dickens’” suggests that Dickens exploited a (perceived) commitment to domesticity to establish his popularity. Poovey quotes an 1850 review in *Fraser’s Magazine* which cites the central reason for Dickens’s popularity as “his deep reverence for the household sanctities, his enthusiastic worship of the household gods” [*Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1988), pp108-109].

³¹ Barickman et al, p61. These ‘problems’ range from childlessness to the mental and physical fragility of family members. Such deviation is measured cautiously in this project against a wider critical construction of a mythic normative or standardised Victorian family model.

virtuoso exuberance of Dickens's enthusiastic delineation of alternative domestic units. The purpose of this chapter is not to deny the impetus of a conventional brand of domesticity altogether, but to decentre and displace these few standardised families from the position of false privilege in which they have been so firmly placed by existing Dickens criticism.

In a similar move to that made in calls for the decentralising of the Victorian nuclear family, Karma Lochrie has encouraged attention to a plethora of heterosexualities, so often obscured under an imagined monolithic model of heterosexual dominance. In a recent paper Lochrie explored the dangers of a queer theory that always assumes a heteronormativity from which alternative, queer desires depart.³² She boldly considered the likelihood that her own work (on Renaissance sexualities) had itself been heteronormative, in its uninterrogated presumption of the dominance of an heterosexual behavioural norm, which invested opposite-sex desire "with an axiomatic and ahistorical force." Like other gender and sexuality tags, 'heterosexuality' covers a wide diversity of sexual choices, practices and desires – far from being a coherent identity, this label obfuscates a vast range of wildly ranging impulses and acts.³³ This thesis responds to the challenge of dispelling the assumption of a hegemonic heterosexual norm, on which so much queer theory has been founded. An interrogation of critical creations, and enshrinements, of 'the normal' is especially urgent in approaches to Dickens's era. In Victorian studies marriage and the associated domestic family unit have traditionally been figured as exemplary of normative – specifically heteronormative – and idealised behaviours. Attention to multiple experiences and manipulations of marriage and the diversity of marital resistances in Dickens's fiction allows the queerness of Victorian marriages and families to be recognised.

³² Karma Lochrie, 'Have We Ever Been Queer?', paper given at 'Queer Matters', conference at King's College London, 28-30 May 2004.

³³ As Michael Warner points out in a book documenting the impossibility of being fully normal, one of early sex researcher Alfred Kinsey's "most dramatic points was that non-normative sexual activities are, in fact, the statistical norm" [*The Trouble with Normal* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000), p55].

“Even Supposing – ”: The Disruption of Marriage as Closure

The wealth of scholarship exploring Dickens’s representations of marriage has been equally beset by the domestic paradox. Despite Dickens’s frequent distortions and repeated rejections of the perceived ideal of marital bliss, recent critics such as Rita Lubitz still take pains to concur with a traditional critical perspective, (here that of Dalziel from 1958) that “Dickens, like many Victorian writers, felt that marriage was ‘the most important event and the happiest state of life.’”³⁴ Lubitz’s assertion is belied, not only by her exploration of the multiple negative formulations of marriage offered by Dickens’s fiction, but by the entire structure of her book, which offers four meaty chapters on martial dominance, avarice and other discontents, whilst only finding material enough for a noticeably slimmer single chapter on happier unions.

The title of Lubitz’s necessarily flimsy celebratory section, ‘Concluding Marriages: And they Lived Happily Ever After’, speaks directly to the continuing critical imperative (evinced strongly by Mary Armstrong) to read Dickens’s often fissured and unsatisfying endings as a triumphant and unambivalent recapitulation to conventional domesticity. Chase and Levenson argue that “Dickens always acknowledged the social and literary pressures toward a marital resolution. Like others who inhabit these narrative conventions, he accepts the celebration of marriage as a response to the demands of plot as well as the fantasies of readers.”³⁵ The continuing fantasies of modern day readers have clearly contributed to such wishful beliefs as Lubitz’s that “the heroes and heroines of these works are compensated for the difficulties they have to endure by being permitted to enter the holy state of matrimony.”³⁶

The apparent reaffirmation of matrimony at the *end* of these novels has exerted a disproportionate influence on critical perceptions, which are predisposed to favour end-weight by a yearning for narrative linearity:

Dickens’s vision of marriage as the desired end of human activity is

³⁴ Rita Lubitz, *Marital Power in Dickens’s Fiction* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), p115.

³⁵ Chase and Levenson, p91.

³⁶ Lubitz, p115. A cursory glance at the details of the unions of central characters raises questions about the kind of compensation or reward offered by, say, marriage to a mutilated, almost-corpse whose nuptials make him consider “whether it is not the best thing [he . . .] can do, to die” (*Our Mutual Friend*, p735).

established early in his career; nor does it seriously falter. Almost without exception his novels continue to celebrate weddings in their final chapters.³⁷

The prevalent bias towards the apparent final word of the closing chapter makes possible Barbara Weiss's confident perception of marriage as the ultimate Dickensian endorsement, despite her appreciation that "from *Dombey and Son* onwards, the endings of Dickens's novels are flawed, if not by the author's lack of conviction, then at least by an uneasy suspicion on the part of the reader that *the contradictory evidence of the novels* makes such happy endings problematical at best (emphasis added)."³⁸ Following Boone's wider exploration of nineteenth-century "counter-narrative: the persistent 'undoing' of the dominant [marital] tradition"³⁹, Kelly Hager has made a convincing case for the prevalence of such contradictory evidence in Dickens's counter-marriage plotting:

All of the novels are concerned – in a multiplicity of ways both large and small in a manner that is alternatively comic, tragic, melodramatic and ironic with the phenomenon of the failed marriage.⁴⁰

Dickens's repeated use of an integral narrative strategy that Hager calls 'the divorce plot', which "revolves around a serious flaw within a marriage and leads to the dissolution of that union", militates against the assumption that Dickensian marriage is primarily a closure device.⁴¹

D. A. Miller's attention to the fragmentary, discontinuous experience of novel reading, which is especially applicable to Dickens's favoured method of serial publication (most usually in monthly parts), provides a useful corrective to the persistent illusion of the finite, mono-directional text. Miller points to the ways that "the form dramatises its length serially, in the regularly broken line between letters, chapters, instalments, and even whole works."⁴² As the strategy of identifying Dickens's establishment of cross-textual literary competence (elaborated in the previous chapter, and employed throughout) makes clear, this thesis is committed to exploring the alternatives to linear reading, which are presented

³⁷ Weiss, 'The Dilemma of Happily Ever After', p69.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Boone, p2.

⁴⁰ Kelly Hager, 'Plotting Marriage: Dickens, Divorce and the Failed-Marriage Plot' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, 1992), p18.

⁴¹ Ibid., pviii.

⁴² D. A. Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981), p277.

and often actively suggested by the Dickens corpus. In the explicit disruption of expected marital closure certain Dickens texts stridently demand such a de-prioritising of ending, as they demonstrate Dickens's self-conscious challenge to both the literary and cultural demands of plot.

Bleak House (1853) famously makes a radical break with the finality at the centre of novelistic tradition in Esther's unfinished closing utterance, "they can very well do without much beauty in me – even supposing –" (p989). This flagrant refusal to provide closure of either syntax or meaning creates a narrative indeterminacy, which is specifically also an indeterminacy of heterosexual resolution. Although the ostensible completing device of Esther and Allan Woodcourt's marriage is nominally in place, the ceremony fails to provide the certainty that the novel form and its readers traditionally demand.⁴³ Here, even an apparently celebratory union presents a studied hollowness that undermines, even while avowing, more positive sentiments. Ledger identifies the domestic set pieces which close the novel as "very staged and self-conscious":

The new Bleak House at the novel's close is presented to us almost as a stage set, it is painstakingly crafted (by Mr Jarndyce, as a proxy for Dickens), and thereby draws attention to itself as a constructed object rather than a naturally occurring phenomenon.⁴⁴

The plausibility of marriage and indeed heterosexuality as a satisfying, completing structure is similarly challenged by the two endings of *Great Expectations* (1861). On the advice of Bulwer Lytton, Dickens altered his original ending in which Pip and a remarried Estella meet accidentally and fleetingly, provoking Pip's concluding reflection on their mutual suffering. The revised ending as published apparently coheres more closely with traditional romance (and indeed novel) structures by, albeit ambiguously, suggesting a continued union between the pair in Pip's famous last words: "I saw the shadow of no parting from her."⁴⁵ Paradoxically, though, this capitulation to readerly demands for closure through

⁴³ Mark Turner has read this indeterminate 'ending' as Dickens's specifically urban appreciation of "the never-ending uncertainties thrown up by a disorientating city in which there is 'fog everywhere'" [*Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London* (London: Reaktion, 2003), p26].

⁴⁴ Sally Ledger, 'From Queen Caroline to Lady Dedlock: Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 32.2 (2004), pp575-600, p594.

⁴⁵ Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (London: Penguin, 2003), p484. All further references are to this edition and are given in parentheses within the text.

heterosexual union (Bulwer Lytton anticipated that readers would be disappointed by the original ending) poignantly dramatises not only the insufficiency of that union, but invalidates perceptions of marriage as the only closure, as an opposite alternative is both possible and plausible:

That the text can issue in either of two opposite resolutions points up the indeterminacy with which [...] has been invested. The appropriateness of each ending is thus bound to bespeak a certain inappropriateness as well.⁴⁶

The insufficiency of marriage, articulated explicitly in these fissured endings and in Dickens's multiple presentations of connubial misery and familial dysfunction, is also insistently expressed through Dickens's exploration of a plethora of marital resistances and alternative lifestyles, incompatible with hegemonic family models. Through Dickens's relentless critique the traditional marital model is de-instated, creating space for other patterns of care and new understandings of 'family'. This chapter contends that through cross-textual repetition, Dickens establishes a diversity of alternative intimacies and self-elected families, including bachelorhood, co-operative female independence and romantic female friendship, in preference to the constraining homogeneity of the traditional marital model.

Blissful Bachelors: Resisting Marital Resolution

The specific form of marital resistance exercised by the single male was experienced as particularly provoking during the nineteenth century. Many of the closest members of Dickens's literary and social circles, including George Cruikshank and Wilkie Collins, entered often anxious debates about the nature and social impact of bachelorhood. Dickens's fictional celebrations of domesticated bachelorhood were pioneering, requiring the creation of new linguistic combinations for their full expression. His innovative attention to the possible homeliness of bachelor life is reflected by the OED record of two new combinations. The blissful domesticity of *Our Mutual Friend's* Mortimer and Eugene in "a bachelor cottage near Hampton" is cited, along with another highly positive domestic representation of "a sweet bachelor apartment" from *Little Dorrit* (1857).

⁴⁶ D. A. Miller, p274.

These celebratory coinages are at variance with George Wing's critique of Dickens's insensitive treatment of bachelors, who in Wing's account (the only existing article to focus on this subject) are represented as failed suitors, "unmarried not out of choice."⁴⁷ Wing examines an early sketch, 'A Passage in the Life of Mr Watkins Tottle', identifying the bachelor protagonist as "the first of the singles to be ridiculed."⁴⁸ 'Tottle' is perceived as setting a precedent for a career of bachelor-bashing, throughout which "Dickens never completely refrains from deriding the unpaired."⁴⁹ Through attention to the multiplicity of celebrated wilful bachelors in Dickens's fiction, this chapter abandons Wing's misleadingly narrow model.

Katherine Snyder has amply demonstrated that conflicts in nineteenth-century attempts to classify and portray bachelors resulted in incoherent conceptions of 'the bachelor':

Bachelor trouble was, fundamentally, gender trouble. While they were often seen as violating gendered norms, bachelors were sometimes contradictorily thought to incarnate the desire and identifications of hegemonic bourgeois manhood.⁵⁰

Thus Dickens's *Sketches of Young Couples* (1840) accommodates mutually exclusive comic representations of bachelors as both "that unfortunate class of society" - "unhappy men", who in their lonely envy of the married are "inflamed and angered" by the excessive demonstrations of 'loving couples'⁵¹ - and cheerfully single gentlemen whose enthusiastic enjoyment of "Taverns, Hotels, Billiard Rooms and Gaming Houses" is threatened by the "horrors and dangers" of a leap year ("destructive to the peace of mankind"), in which women may propose.⁵² Such scenes of bachelor pleasures are given fuller exploration in the anonymous handbook, *The Bachelor's Pocket Book for 1851*, subtitled as a 'Man of Pleasure's Guide to All that is Worth Seeing in "This Little Village", forming the Most Complete Directory to Casinos, Saloons, Theatres, Concerts, Night Houses, &c', which provided recommendations to the various pleasure spots of London with advice on

⁴⁷ George Wing, 'The First of the Singles', *Dickens Quarterly*, 6.1 (1989), pp10-16, p10.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p12. This sketch was first published in January and February 1835 as part of Dickens's series of *Tales for the Monthly Magazine*. It was collected the following year in *Sketches by Boz*.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p14.

⁵⁰ Katherine Snyder, *Bachelors, Manhood and the Novel 1850-1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), p3.

⁵¹ Boz, *Sketches of Young Couples*, 'The Young Couple', collected in *Sketches by Boz*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1957), p563.

⁵² Boz, *Sketches of Young Couples*, 'An Urgent Remonstrance', pp551-552.

reasonable rates.⁵³ This “Man of Pleasure” usage of the term ‘bachelor’ continued to compete with popular narratives of ‘bachelorhood resolved’ throughout the period of Dickens’s career.

George Cruikshank’s sketch series of 1844, *The Bachelor’s Own Book, or, The Progress of Mr Lambkin (gent.), in the Pursuit of Pleasure and Amusement: and also in Search of Health and Happiness* distills a familiar “progress” trajectory into twenty-four plates, the substance of which is almost entirely revealed in the title, where “happiness” inevitably translates as marriage. Cruikshank stereotypically depicts a lonely illness attended by a hired nurse as the result of Lambkin’s indulgence in the exclusively male “pleasure[s] and amusement[s]” of betting and heavy social drinking. Recovering his health, Mr Lambkin determines upon a more staid single lifestyle, “but feels buried alive in the Grand Mausoleum Club; and contemplating an old bachelor member who sits poring over the newspapers all day, he feels horror-struck at the possibility of such a fate becoming his own and determines to seek a reconciliation with the Lady of his affections.”⁵⁴ The perceived negative social consequences of the bachelor’s departure from normative familial domesticity are emphasised by Cruikshank’s inclusion of newspapers bearing the captions “Refuge for the Destitute”, “Home for the Housewife” and “[. . .] on Solitude” in his depiction of the un(re)productive Mausoleum Club.

Cruikshank’s headlines convey common contemporary concerns that bachelorhood contributed to increased numbers of so-called ‘redundant’ women, and could result in more applications for charitable relief from those without families to financially support them. Demographic shifts throughout the nineteenth century resulted in a dramatic increase in the population of unmarried women (famously addressed in W. R. Greg’s 1862 article ‘Why are Women Redundant?’) and a corresponding escalation of anxieties surrounding the volitional bachelor. Through an abrupt recapitulation to familial domesticity, Cruikshank spares Mr Lambkin from the growing stigma surrounding wilful bachelorhood. The final plate of the series, portraying Lambkin’s inevitable wedding breakfast, is accompanied by

⁵³ Michael Slater provides a commentary on *The Bachelor’s Pocket Book for 1851* in an article of the same name in *Sexuality and Victorian Literature*, pp128-140.

⁵⁴ George Cruikshank, *The Bachelor’s Own Book* (1844, repr. Glasgow: David Bryce, 1888), plate 22.

an inscription that concludes with Lambkin's marriage speech: "May the single be married and [. . .] married happily."⁵⁵

Such common narratives of 'bachelor development' were faithful to the etymological origins of the term. In its earliest uses, a bachelor was a novice, a junior in training, either for fully fledged knighthood, craftsmanship or a university degree. The currently most common sense of bachelor as "an unmarried man (of marriageable age)" has, from its origins, carried an implication of incompleteness.⁵⁶ Integral to this common use (and explicit in the rarer application of 'bachelor' more generally to "an inexperienced person, a novice") is a sense of transgression against the imperative to marriage. As Howard Chudacoff puts it, "in modern Western society, any choice of lifestyle that diverts or prevents a presumably marriageable person from the social obligation to settle down and start a family has been considered inappropriate."⁵⁷

Although Boone has pointed to the important gendered differential between male and female marital 'choices', Sedgwick's work cautions against over-estimating the level of male volition with regard to marriage. Sedgwick reads the nineteenth-century fictional bachelor as a visible emblem of the "refus[al] of sexual choice, in a society where sexual choice for men is both compulsory and always self contradictory."⁵⁸ Bachelors circumvented the imperatives to marriage and heterosexuality as well as apparently rejecting the role of domestic provider, central to what Herbert Sussman has described as "normative bourgeois manliness":

Bourgeois masculinity is also defined in relation to the domestic sphere within criteria that value the role of bread-winner for a domestic establishment

⁵⁵ Ibid., plate 24.

⁵⁶ OED records 1386 as the first use of the term in this sense.

⁵⁷ Howard Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), p8.

⁵⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'The Beast in the Closet: James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic', in *Sex, Politics and Science in the Nineteenth Century Novel*, ed. by Ruth Bernard Yeazell (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986), pp148-186, p160. For another version of this article see Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).

and that situate affectionate as well as sexual life within marriage. In short, normative bourgeois masculinity enforces compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory matrimony.⁵⁹

Such normative expectations informed stereotypes of the ‘selfish’ bachelor whose spending on behalf of himself rather than for a family was perceived as deviant. These assumptions also contributed to deeply anxious responses, such as T. S. Arthur’s paranoid 1845 description of bachelorhood as “strange, unnatural, criminal.”⁶⁰ The prevalence of anxieties surrounding the single male in the mid nineteenth century is also clearly evinced in the repetition of a particular plot structure in popular bachelor narratives. The typical story of bachelor ‘development’ refused to acknowledge the bachelor’s rejection of otherwise compulsory heterosexuality, depicting his marital resistance only to resolve it through final nuptials.⁶¹

Wilkie Collins rejects exactly this repetitive, predictable plotting of bachelorhood-resolved, in a mischievous 1859 article for Dickens’s weekly journal *All the Year Round*:

The bachelor has been profusely served up on all sorts of literary tables;
But the presentation of him has hitherto been remarkable for a singularly
monotonous flavour of matrimonial sauce. We have heard of his loneliness,
and its remedy; of his solitary position in illness, and its remedy; of the
miserable neglect of his linen, and its remedy.⁶²

Collins refuses to bemoan bachelor life, offering a rare celebration of the diversity of a “succession of remarkable bachelors” whose true characters – closely concealed in

⁵⁹ Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), pp4-5.

⁶⁰ T. S. Arthur, quoted in Boone, p279. For a comprehensive treatment of negative bachelor stereotyping see Snyder, pp28-31; and for continuing concerns about volitional bachelorhood later in the century see John Tosh, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1999), p173; and John Tosh, ‘Domesticity and Manliness in the Victorian Middle Class: The Family of Edward Benson White’, in *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800*, ed. by Michael Roper and John Tosh (London: Routledge, 1991), pp44-73, p67.

⁶¹ This listening to the striking similarities in tales told to solve the perceived problem of bachelorhood is not intended to obscure what Sussman has called “the plurality of male gender formations [. . .] crucial not only to counter the still pervasive essentialist view of maleness, but also to deconstruct the monolithic view of masculinity” (p8). Rather, the recognition of the ascendancy of particular models permits appreciation of Dickens’s resistances to the dominant discourses that determined appropriate performances of masculinity.

⁶² Wilkie Collins, ‘The Bachelor Bedroom’, *All the Year Round*, 6 August 1859, I, pp355-360, p355.

everyday society – unfold at night to a select exclusively male group “in the loose atmosphere of the Bachelor Bedroom.”⁶³

The piece operates as the culmination of Collins’s articles on bachelorhood for both of Dickens’s journals. Previously in *Household Words* Collins had written a variety of short pieces critiquing marriage from the provocative perspective of the confirmed bachelor. In ‘Bold Words by a Bachelor’ (1856) Collins argued “that the general idea of the scope and purpose of the institution of Marriage is a miserably narrow one.”⁶⁴ These ‘Bold Words’ on the limitations of the familial model are delivered by the socially aberrant figure of “an incurably-settled old bachelor.”⁶⁵ ‘An Awful Warning to Bachelors’ (1858) is delivered through a similarly ‘incurable’ bachelor persona, who declares: “I have the strongest possible antipathy to being settled in life; and that, if I thought either of my eyes were capable of fixing itself on a young woman, I would shut that eye up, by an effort of will, henceforth and forever.”⁶⁶ Collins, albeit in a comic mode, expends a great deal of journalistic energy in defence of the wilfully single male. Both these pieces hold the prestigious opening article position in *Household Words*, suggesting Dickens’s editorial support for their content. This support is further evinced by Dickens’s vindication of bachelorhood in his own fiction.

Importantly, Collins’s enthusiastic portrayal of the variety of bachelor experience in ‘The Bachelor Bedroom’ is both spatially and conceptually positioned amongst Dickens’s comparable novelistic ruminations on the same theme. The August 6 issue of *All the Year Round* begins with the fifteenth and exactly central instalment of *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859, issued in thirty-one weekly parts) and closes with Collins’s article, chased by an advertisement for the third monthly part of *A Tale*, which Dickens published in both weekly and monthly formats. The collective bound edition of the journal emphasises the continuity between these two texts; the sixteenth instalment of *A Tale*, which begins the following weekly number of August 13, is positioned on the opposite page to Collins’s ‘Bachelor Bedroom’. In this novel Dickens offers the precise collation of bachelorhood minus the

⁶³ Ibid., p355, p358.

⁶⁴ Wilkie Collins, ‘Bold Words by a Bachelor’, *Household Words*, 13 December 1856, XIV, pp505-507, p507.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p351.

⁶⁶ Wilkie Collins, ‘An Awful Warning to Bachelors’, *Household Words*, 27 March 1858, XVII, pp337-340, p337.

“matrimonial sauce” that Collins’s piece promotes. The immediate proximity between Collins’s article and the closing advert for *A Tale of Two Cities* further suggests an overlap in purpose. Through careful editorial positioning, Dickens employs Collins’s critique to recommend the treatment of bachelorhood in his own serial, and to prime readers for a more favourable reception of the provocative figure of the volitionally single male.⁶⁷

“You were a bachelor in your cradle”: Mr Lorry’s Congenital Bachelorhood

The sixteenth instalment of *A Tale of Two Cities* returns to the unconventional, extended Manette ‘family’, which accommodates elderly bachelor banker Mr Jarvis Lorry, and former-nursemaid turned general carer and cook Miss Pross, as well as the more conventional father, daughter, suitor triad. Mr Lorry experiences the Manette household as “the sunny part of his life”, and is described “thanking his bachelor stars for having lighted him in his declining years to a Home.”⁶⁸ Whilst in the reverent capitalisation of “Home” this phrase appears to endorse a traditional domestic model, conventional domestic expectations are simultaneously undercut. Mr Lorry’s pleasure in this household is strictly one of “his declining years”, which have released him from the imperative to marriage, allowing him to enter domestic life without becoming a spouse. In the sixteenth instalment Dickens elaborates on the perfect appropriateness of Mr Lorry’s bachelor status, employing this character to provide an emphatic statement of his divergence from the contemporary cultural expectation of bachelor ‘rehabilitation’ through marriage:

‘Dear me! This is an occasion that makes a man speculate on all he has lost.

Dear, dear, dear! To think that there might have been a Mrs Lorry, any time these fifty years almost!’

‘Not at all!’ From Miss Pross.

‘You think there might never have been a Mrs Lorry?’ asked the gentleman of that name.

⁶⁷ Mark Turner has argued similarly for Anthony Trollope’s use of positive bachelor discourse in contemporary periodicals to support his, albeit muted, novelistic affirmation of bachelorhood: “A sense of propriety would have prevented Trollope from being any more explicit about the pleasures a man gives up by marrying, but such open proclamations were unnecessary as the discourse of the bachelor circulated in magazines and pamphlets around the time of the serialisation of *The Belton Estate*” (*Trollope and the Magazines*, p117); see also for a comprehensive description of this variety of bachelor oriented periodicals in the 1860s and 70s (pp117-121).

⁶⁸ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (London: Penguin, 2003), p96, p103. All further references are to this edition and are given in parentheses within the text.

‘Pooh!’ rejoined Miss Pross; ‘you were a bachelor in your cradle.’

‘Well!’ observed Mr Lorry, beamingly adjusting his little wig, ‘that seems probable, too.’

‘And you were cut out for a bachelor’, pursued Miss Pross, ‘before you were put in your cradle.’

‘Then, I think,’ said Mr Lorry, ‘that I was very unhandsomely dealt with, and that I ought to have had a voice in the selection of my pattern’ (p200).

Although Mr Lorry pays lip service to dominant contemporary perceptions of bachelorhood as an “unhandsome” vocation, the end of this discussion is clearly at variance with Mr Lorry’s cheerful and immediate acceptance of Miss Pross’s suggestions. His ‘beaming’ agreement with her conception of him as a bachelor from inception suggests a pleasure in her understanding, as well as a desire to justify what was increasingly perceived as a deviant or perverse lifestyle.

As an elderly “gentleman of sixty” (p20), who ages eighteen years throughout the novel’s action, Mr Lorry comes under a category that was, as Snyder argues, treated with particular suspicion:

The polymorphic variety of negative bachelor stereotypes reveals no single trajectory of aberrance, but any number of ways in which bachelors, especially those ‘old bachelors’ who seemed to have run permanently off the rails of the marriage track, were seen as veering away from an acceptable performance of manhood.⁶⁹

In Donald Grant Mitchell’s (alias I. K. Marvel) immensely popular *Reveries of a Bachelor: Or a Book of the Heart* the young single protagonist, despite his ambivalence to marriage, marks elderly unreformed bachelorhood as aberrant: “I will never [. . .] live a bachelor till sixty; never so surely as there is hope in man, or charity in woman, or faith in both.”⁷⁰ At seventy-eight Mr Lorry anxiously describes his position as “a solitary old bachelor [. . .] there is nobody to weep for me.” However, this popular stereotype is immediately rejected through Sydney Carton’s firm corrective, “How can you say that?” Carton points to the high esteem and deep affection that Lorry receives from his self-elected family, until Lorry

⁶⁹ Snyder, p28.

⁷⁰ I. K. Marvel, *Reveries of a Bachelor* (New York: 1850), first published in England two years later (London: David Bogue, 1852), p65. Snyder documents the popular success of this text, which went through over 50 unauthorised editions, p48.

is forced into the admission, “I didn’t quite mean what I said” (p322). A celebratory image of Lorry’s unconventional relationship to and membership of this family is incorporated within Carton’s final vision of the Manettes:

I see the good old man, so long their friend, in ten years’ time enriching
them with all he has, and passing tranquilly to his reward (pp389-390).

Lorry’s central role in this family of his own choosing is also expressed in Phiz’s illustration, ‘Under the Plane Tree’, which was prominently placed as frontispiece to the first bound edition. In contrast to the peripheral Sydney, Mr Lorry appears in the centre of the family grouping.

Carton’s closing vision of the Manettes positions him in an equivocal and carefully negotiated bachelor relationship to conventional familial domesticity, similar to that experienced by Mr Lorry: “I see the lives for which I lay down my life, peaceful, useful, prosperous and happy” (p389). As James Eli Adams suggests, “although Carton celebrates domesticity, he does so in confirming his own exclusion from it, save in the pleasures of imagination. [. . .] Carton’s meditation offers a vicarious experience of domesticity [. . .] in which he is a divinity freed from further responsibility in human affairs.”⁷¹ Indeed Carton’s ‘interest’ in Lucie operates unconvincingly as a rivalry with Darnay. Rather, this triangular structure allows Carton, much like Lorry, to negotiate a de-sexualised relationship with his family of choice, as his avowed love object is already safely committed elsewhere.

Dickens’s recourse to models of born and fated bachelorhood, predestined by “bachelor stars”, to convey the centrality of unmarried status to Mr Lorry’s entire being, also coheres with popular representations that “posed, and attempted to answer, a host of questions about the nature and meaning of bachelorhood: Was the bachelor born or did he acquire his bachelor traits? Was bachelorhood chosen as an act of conviction or imposed by an incident of fate? Was the bachelor’s behaviour volitional or non-volitional, an issue of will or defect, badness or weakness?”⁷² In his insistence on Mr Lorry’s experience of bachelorhood as natural and unavoidable, Dickens resists contemporary perceptions of

⁷¹ James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Manhood* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1995), p59.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp28-29.

unmarried men as either failed or wilfully aberrant. In this, he anticipates (albeit in a novelistic rather than a clinical register) the strategy employed by Havelock Ellis and other sexologists at the end of the century to de-stigmatise homosexuality by arguing for its non-volitional, congenital basis. As Laura Doan and Chris Waters have documented, early sexological interventions attempted to counter claims of depravity “by deeming homosexual behaviour to be less the result of misguided choice than the outcome of an innate, congenital condition over which the individual had little control.”⁷³ Chris White has questioned the veracity of sexologists’ congenital thesis, suggesting the tactical value of such a position:

It is impossible to know to what extent these theorists genuinely believed in the theory of innate homosexuality, or to what extent it was a vital strategic device in arguing for toleration and acceptance.⁷⁴

Dickens’s naturalisation and valorisation of Lorry’s single status clearly demonstrates his appreciation of the insufficiency of marriage as the exclusive mechanism for domestic fulfilment. In Mr Lorry’s selection of the Manettes as his family of choice, he achieves a domestic idyll that is singularly untied to the demands of reproductive sexuality.

The challenge to the normative family presented by the bachelor’s marital resistance has been elided within Dickens criticism through a pervasive de-sexing of Dickens’s single men. Chase and Levenson’s summary is typical: “Popularity is a saving alternative to sexuality. From *Pickwick* onward [. . .] Dickens invents characters who will be removed from the heat of desire.”⁷⁵ Readings of Dickens’s bachelors as asexual work to contain and conceal the willing abstainer’s repudiation of a public sexuality that must always be heterosexuality. Although Sedgwick has described the bachelor’s potential to “startlingly desexualise [. . .] the question of male sexual choice”,⁷⁶ a more enabling approach has been recommended by Lochrie, in which the refusal of sexual activity does not indicate

⁷³ Laura Doan and Chris Waters, ‘Homosexualities’, in *Sexology Uncensored*, p42.

⁷⁴ Chris White, (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Writings on Homosexuality: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 1999), p3.

⁷⁵ Chase and Levenson, p94. Donald Hall sees Tom Pinch similarly as beatified by a celibacy that transforms him into a “good angel” [*Fixing Patriarchy: Feminism and Mid Victorian Male Novelists* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p28], whilst John Bowen refers baldly to “*Pickwick*’s sexlessness” (p63). As shown in a following section, Brian McCuskey has recently challenged a tradition in which “*Pickwick*’s specifically sexual innocence has remained unquestioned and even asserted as a precondition for both the novel’s humour and its canonical status” [“‘Your Love-Sick *Pickwick*’: The Erotics of Service”, *Dickens Studies Annual*, 25 (1996), pp245-266, p245].

⁷⁶ Sedgwick, *The Beast in the Closet*, p154.

asexuality, but rather constitutes a sexuality based on what one *will not* do.⁷⁷ In her account of the stone butch lesbian, who “does not let her partner touch her sexually”, Judith Halberstam explores the ways in which a refusal of sexual acts can be just as meaningful as a performance of them:

Nonperformance, in this formulation, signifies as heavily as performance and reveals the ways in which performativity itself is as much a record of what a body will not do as what it might do.⁷⁸

Given the absolute bias in current critical and popular thought towards defining sexuality on the type of person or acts selected, Lochrie’s and Halberstam’s oppositional call for attention to the significance of the type of person or acts rejected offers a bold (although still gestural) attempt to rethink sexual categories. Halberstam asserts that “the stone butch has the dubious distinction of being possibly the only sexual identity defined almost solely in terms of what practices she does *not* engage in. Is there any other sexual identity, we might ask, defined by what a person will not do? Furthermore, could we even imagine designating male sexual identities in terms of non-performance?”⁷⁹ Vincent Bertolini suggests that bachelorhood may offer just such an identity, as it is “defined negatively by its total lack of explicit sexual content, since all practices single, or reciprocal, are proscribed (hence the double meaning, which persists as a Latin trace in modern romance languages, of *celibate* as ‘unmarried male’ and ‘sexually abstinent’).”⁸⁰

This chapter’s exploration of the anxieties surrounding the single male during the period of Dickens’s career suggests that perceptions of bachelorhood as sexual in its non-performance of marital heterosexuality contributed to the problematisation of the wilfully unmarried male. Sussman convincingly demonstrates that in this period uses of the term ‘bachelor’ reflected “a construction of masculinity developed in the nineteenth century to code the rejection of heterosexuality.” As he argues, such a rejection incited both “suspicion” of the bachelor and “social pressure compel[ling] him toward a marriage that is necessary to his self-fashioning as bourgeois man.”⁸¹ Mr Lorry’s refusal of the only publicly available form of sexuality propels him into an apparently paradoxical asexual

⁷⁷ Lochrie, ‘Have We Ever Been Queer?’

⁷⁸ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p120, p126.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p123.

⁸⁰ Vincent Bertolini, ‘Fireside Chastity: The Erotics of Sentimental Bachelorhood in the 1850s’, *American Literature*, 68.4 (1996), pp707-737, p709.

⁸¹ Sussman, p66.

experience of bachelorhood, a sexual category defined by what he will not do. His repudiation of heterosexuality contributes importantly to the plethora of non-heterosexual and non-reproductive choices insistently celebrated in Dickens's fiction.

Though operating through very different vocabularies, there are startling overlaps between Dickens's representation of Lorry as a born and pre-destined bachelor, and later sexological theories of congenital homosexual inversion. This parallel points to the similar stigma attached to both these forms of heterosexual refusal. Throughout the Victorian period, bachelorhood was progressively associated with same-sex desire:

By the turn of the century, all forms of non-procreative sexual activity [. . .], even the *absence* of sexual activity within or beyond marriage, were coming increasingly to be seen as possible signs of homosexuality [. . .] 'Bachelor' came to be used often as an slurring insinuation against gay men or as an insider's codeword by them.⁸²

Whilst this linkage became explicit during the fin de siècle after sexologists had officially constituted 'homosexuality', Snyder carefully emphasises the pre-existent homoerotic nuances concurrent with "the epistemological indeterminacy of bachelorhood [that] both preceded and postdated" such medico/legal definitions.⁸³ The anxiety surrounding bachelors earlier in the century, then, was never completely differentiated from a suspicion of same-sex desire. Dickens exploits this area of indeterminate aberrance that surrounds the wilfully unmarried man to explore the potential homoerotic dynamic in the resistance of wedlock. In *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Pickwick Papers* (1837) Dickens explicitly considers marital resistance as an expression of heteroerotic aversion, developing a series of connections between the refusal of marriage, heterosexual disinclination and homoerotic desire.

"My Intentions are Opposed to Touching the Lady": Bachelorhood as Heterosexual Disinclination

A return to what Lane has called "the enveloping warmth of that confidential fireside" shared by Mortimer Lightwood and Eugene Wrayburn, discovers the bachelor friends in

⁸² Snyder, p33.

⁸³ Ibid.

their newly set-up “joint establishment” in a “bachelor cottage near Hampton” – with “their dinner done, they turned towards the fire to smoke” (p147). Paradoxically, Eugene and Mortimer’s comfortable inhabitation of conventional domestic space allows them to pass as normative representatives of Dickensian home life, as in Lane’s account, and to be spotted as “Dickens’s closest approach to a gay couple.”⁸⁴ In this “bachelor cottage” Mortimer que(e)ries his friend’s refusal of the wife selected for him by his father (whom Eugene ironically calls M. R. F. – My Respected Father, p148). This patriarch, as Eugene makes clear, perceives matrimony as compulsory to his son’s fulfilment of respectable middle-class masculinity:

M. R. F. pre-arranged for myself that I was to be the barrister I am (with the slight addition of an enormous practice, which has not accrued), and also the married man I am not [. . .] Considering myself sufficiently incongruous on my legal eminence, I have until now suppressed my domestic destiny (p149).

Mortimer’s suggestion that Eugene meet the unspecified woman proposed by M. R. F. implies that physical attraction may overcome Eugene’s marital objections. Eugene emphatically rejects this scheme and the potential for opposite-sex attraction it represents: “Anything to carry out M. R. F.’s arrangements, I am sure, with the greatest pleasure – except matrimony [. . .] No, there is no help for it; one of the prophetic deliveries of M. R. F. must forever remain unfulfilled. With every disposition to oblige him, he must submit to a failure” (p150). The typically languid Eugene’s uncharacteristic decisive vehemence on this single issue is explained through an unmistakable reference to heterosexual disinclination:

‘Touching the lady, Eugene.’

‘There M. R. F. ceases to be amusing, because *my intentions are opposed to touching the lady*’ (emphasis added, p149).

This careful non-specificity allows Eugene’s opposition to physical female contact, explicitly expressed in his use of the double meaning of “touching”, to apply to all members of the opposite sex.

⁸⁴ Robb, *Strangers*, p210.

This articulation of the heterosexual aversion that impels Eugene's resistance to marital domesticity, is framed by his fantasy of an eccentric alternative domestic scenario in which he and Mortimer, removed from all other society, keep a lighthouse together:

It would be a defined and limited monotony. It would not extend beyond two people. Now, it's a question with me, Mortimer, whether a monotony defined with that precision and limited to that extent, might not be more endurable than the unlimited monotony of one's fellow-creatures (p148).

The disparity between Eugene's employment of ennui as a device to avoid wedlock – “Could I possibly support it? I, so soon bored, so constantly, so fatally?” – and his contradictory lighthouse fantasy of “a monotony of two” is carefully emphasised. Eugene meets Mortimer's charge of inconsistency with a request that his friend remember the imagined context: “In a lighthouse. Do me the justice to remember the condition. In a lighthouse” (p150). Of course the other crucial “condition” which remains unnamed but is powerfully suggested in Eugene's response is the particular same-sex partnership of the two friends.

This vision of exclusive, uninterrupted male/male cohabitation is necessarily isolated from a society that seeks to regulate such pairings:

If we were on an isolated rock in a stormy sea [. . .] Lady Tippins couldn't put off to visit us, or better still, might put off and get swamped [. . .] It would be exciting to look out for wrecks (p148).

Notorious contemporary sexual dissident Algernon Swinburne recorded a similar yearning. Charles Sprawson suggests that “Swinburne had always wanted to live in a lighthouse – so long as it was miles out to sea and difficult to get at.”⁸⁵ Indeed, the specifically mutual version of this fantasy in Dickens's novel allows the pair to enjoy visions of the swamping and wrecking of those restrictive social structures that Lady Tippins, as central to the “Chorus” of “The Voice of Society” represents.⁸⁶

Opposite-sex involvements are always positioned as comparatively insignificant and peripheral to the central relationship between the bachelors. Mortimer's alleged attraction

⁸⁵ Charles Sprawson, *Haunts of the Black Masseur: The Swimmer as Hero* (London: Vintage, 2002), p97.

⁸⁶ Dickens labels the core of the Veneerings' dinner guests as “Chorus” throughout his number plans for the novel, making explicit their role as a mouthpiece for “The Voice of Society.”

to Bella Wilfer is reported only by Bella herself, and remains uncorroborated by any action of Mortimer's or reported interaction between them. This nominal heterosexual involvement is confined so completely to the margins of the text that it is unclear whether Bella's imputation of his "attention" and "admiration" (p305, p725) is a vain error. Her assertion that "Mr Lightwood would propose to me if I let him" (p454) receives no textual support, so firmly are the novel's attentions focused on delineating the alternative erotics of Mr Lightwood's principal affective relationship with Eugene. Similarly, Eugene's continued pleasure in his intimate companionship with Mortimer is in direct contrast to his halting and languid 'pursuit' of Lizzie Hexam towards whom he strenuously refuses to "design anything" (p292). Dickens pointedly insists that Mortimer benefits exclusively from a "special exemption of the one friend he valued, from his [Eugene's] reckless indifference" (p283).

Throughout the novel the beautiful and charismatic Lizzie has universally incited the admiration and often the desire of other characters. Eugene Wrayburn by contrast has only the most vacillating 'interest' in her: "At times I have thought yes; at other times I have thought no. Now I have felt that it was absurd, and that it tired and embarrassed me" (p283). His distaste for any lady of M. R. F.'s choice is clearly not provoked by the marital *institutionalising* of the heterosexual encounter, as Eugene is depicted as similarly uninterested by his attempted seduction of Lizzie outside wedlock. Eugene's eventual interrogation of his feeling for Lizzie is carefully constructed, with repeated negatives undermining and destabilising the affirmation of interest:

I should like to see the fellow (Mortimer excepted) who would undertake to tell me that this was not a real sentiment on my part [. . .] and that I would not be true to her (p679).

Eugene has struggled and failed to acquire the socially obligatory "domestic virtues", involving the generation of compulsory heterosexuality and a corresponding "real sentiment" towards the woman he is as equally inclined to give up, as to seduce. He self-prescribes a heavy dose of domesticity, the paraphernalia of which he liberally applies to his and Mortimer's shared offices:

[M]iniature flour-barrel, rolling-pin, spice-box, shelf of brown jars, chopping-board, coffee-mill, dresser elegantly furnished with crockery,

saucepans and pans, roasting jack, a charming kettle, an armoury of dish-covers. The moral influence of these objects, in forming the domestic virtues, may have an immense influence upon me; not upon you, for you are a hopeless case, but upon me. In fact, I have an idea that I feel the domestic virtues already forming (p282).

By costuming this “very complete little kitchen [. . .] in which nothing will ever be cooked” (p281), Eugene hopes to prop-up his deficient performance of domesticity, trusting that in this environment his behaviour may adapt to become a more convincing approximation of normative middle-class masculinity: “I am doing all I can towards self-improvement [. . .] Sensible of my deficiencies, I have surrounded myself with moral influences expressly meant to promote the formation of the domestic virtues” (p293). In this elaborate staging, Dickens de-naturalises the domestic, exposing its constructedness through an attention to the artificiality of the ideal home. A similar critique operates through the staginess of the marital ‘dolls-house’ in *Bleak House*.

Eugene’s marriage, his apparent disciplining into the socially approved domestic household, is explicitly positioned as a dying man’s final effort to make amends by placing “Lizzie and [. . .] reparation before all” (p720) – “If my dear brave girl will take me, I feel persuaded that I shall live *long enough* to be married, dear fellow” (p723, emphasis added). The successful completion of the ceremony immediately incites Eugene to a death wish, totally incongruous, as Lizzie is aware, with the ‘happy’ occasion: “Would you believe [. . .] that on his wedding day he told me that he almost thought the best thing he could do was to die?” (p790)

This extremely muted capitulation to heterosexuality is at variance with the vibrant declarations of love between the two men that only become sayable at this life/death boundary. Mortimer’s statement of feeling on what he sees as his execution of Eugene’s final command dramatises the difficulty of both speaking and fulfilling such a love:

[H]e may die with his request ungratified, with his last wish – intrusted to me – we have long been much more than brothers – unfulfilled. I shall break down, if I try to say more (p717).

The broken clauses in this parenthetical admission of the extent of their relationship demonstrate the extreme difficulty of saying so much. However, this awkward sentence

structure also permits greater revelation, as its scansion links Mortimer and Eugene's relationship as "much more than brothers" to the fear of desperate wishes remaining unfulfilled; the yearning for fulfilment and gratification structurally surrounds the two men's feeling. The apparently fatal nature of Eugene's injuries enables repeated positive articulations of love between men. Mortimer responds to this crisis with an outpouring of suppressed feeling, describing himself as "the friend who has always loved you, admired you, imitated you, founded himself upon you, been nothing without you, and who, God knows, would be there in your place if he could" (p719). In distinct contrast to his abhorrence for the female "touch", Eugene reciprocates with an avowal of his need for physical contact with his beloved friend: "Touch my face with yours, in case I should not hold out until you come back. I love you Mortimer" (p723).

These ardent avowals entirely overshadow the subdued marriage scene. This upstaging reworks the close of *The Pickwick Papers*, where the emphasis placed on another triumphant statement of inter-male fidelity displaces and deprivileges the conventional wedding ceremonies. In both novels, statements of heterosexual aversion combine suggestively with a primary emotional and erotic commitment between men. The refusal of heterosexual performance in Mr Lorry's bachelorhood is here extended into an embrace of alternative erotics. Mortimer's involuntary delight in the only person he is "strongly attached to" (p282) is paralleled by the effect that the similarly charismatic Sam Weller has on Mr Pickwick.⁸⁷ As the following section elaborates, the smiles that Sam can elicit from Pickwick regardless of that gentleman's mood neatly anticipate Eugene's effect on Mortimer, who is depicted in his company "with that amused look that Eugene Wrayburn could always awaken in him without seeming to try or to care (p281).

Dickens's first novel is organised around the eponymous character's efforts to avoid marriage, offering a similarly powerful counter to the perception of Dickens's single men as "unmarried, not out of choice."⁸⁸ Attention to the strenuous marital resistance of *Pickwick's* central character also offers a necessary corrective to the critical insistence on

⁸⁷ The novel abounds with examples of Pickwick's parallel delight in Sam; see, for example, him "smiling despite his vexation, at the idea of Sam's appearance as a witness" (p410), and his response to Sam's arrest: "Mr Pickwick felt a great deal too much touched by the warmth of Sam's attachment, to be able to exhibit any manifestation of anger or displeasure" (p583).

⁸⁸ Wing, p10.

an initial domestic idyll, which is gradually eroded throughout Dickens's career. Even otherwise highly sophisticated recent critiques of the Dickensian family are limited by conformity to the pervasive perception of Dickens's originally sunny fiction as following a continually darkening trajectory to dystopia.⁸⁹

At the start, Dickensian family life was typically an undisturbed interior, a safe cave. In the earliest writings home was an anchor, a value, an emanation [. . . However] as early as *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), the pleasure of inwardness is already mixed with dread.⁹⁰

Chase and Levenson cite Dingley Dell and Samuel Pickwick's Dulwich villa as early bastions of the uncontaminated ideal home. The apparent domestic strongholds of *The Pickwick Papers*, however, are not only externally threatened by the prevalence of counter-family plotting throughout the novel, they are also endangered from within, by the protagonist's intense horror of marriage.

Bachelorhood Besieged: Pickwick's Peril

The central incident of *The Pickwick Papers*, both spatially and conceptually, is the trial famously brought against Mr Pickwick for 'Breach of Promise'. Pickwick is horrified to discover that his landlady, Mrs Bardell, has misconstrued his uncharacteristic agitation about appointing a man-servant as a proposal of marriage. In his eagerness to secure the powerfully charismatic Sam Weller (the locus of sexual magnetism in this novel, attracting the attentions from men and women of all classes through an appealing "ease and freedom for which he was remarkable", p521) to his personal service, Pickwick's behaviour becomes "most mysterious and unaccountable":

He paced the room to and fro with hurried steps, popped his head out of the window at intervals of about three minutes each, constantly referred to his watch, and exhibited many other manifestations of impatience, very unusual with him. It was evident that something of great importance was in contemplation, but what that something was not even Mrs Bardell herself had been enabled to discover (p159).

⁸⁹ Despite strenuous resistance from critics such as Ackroyd (p937), a belief in the darkening Dickens continues to exert critical influence, see for example Weiss, pp69-70.

⁹⁰ Chase and Levenson, pp88-89.

Mr Pickwick's election of the domestic offices of this male servant in preference to the homely provision of a wife is registered throughout the novel as a rejection of normative masculinity. As Brian McCuskey argues, "Pickwick's hiring of Sam is confused with a marriage proposal; from the beginning, then, their relationship depends upon the conflation of heterosexual and homosocial ties."⁹¹ Sergeant Buzfuz's court case for the plaintiff employs dominant models of appropriate manliness as compulsory heterosexuality, critiquing Pickwick's ability to resist his landlady and his "intention of gradually breaking off from" her as "unmanly" (p454). Indeed, as Buzfuz again emphasises, Pickwick's very appearance to defend himself at this trial signals his deviation from approved masculine behaviours: "It would have been more decent in him, more becoming, in better judgement and in better taste, if he had stopped away" (p452). Ginger Frost observes the illumination of gender roles in both actual and fictional breach of promise trials during this period. Participants in these public dramatisations of the failure of domestic ideology regularly emphasised perceived infringements of "'proper' manliness and womanliness."⁹² Indeed, gendered behavioural codes made it very difficult for accused male jilters to respond to the allegation, because "the very act of defending the action was (at base) accusing the plaintiff of lying."⁹³

Pickwick's strenuous efforts to resist Mrs Bardell's marital advances are repeatedly marked as inexplicable under the prevailing exclusively heterosexual logic of his society. This hegemonic view is represented through the perplexity of Mrs Bardell's friends:

'And your master, young man, a gentleman with money, as could never feel the expense of a wife, no more than nothing [. . .] why, there ain't the faintest shade of an excuse for his behaviour. Why don't he marry her?'

'Ah,' said Sam, 'to be sure; that's the question' (p349).

This hanging question is only intensified by Mrs Bardell's perfect fulfilment of the homely standards that elsewhere in Dickens's fiction apparently constitute the domestic ideal. That Mrs Bardell is well qualified for the status of 'angel in the house' is clear from her description as "a comely woman of bustling manners and agreeable appearance, with a natural genius for cooking, improved by study and long practice into an exquisite talent

⁹¹ McCuskey, p261.

⁹² Ginger Frost, *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class and Gender in Victorian England* (Charlottesville and London: UP Virginia, 1995), p40.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p44.

[. . .] Cleanliness and quiet reigned throughout the house; and in it Mr Pickwick's will was law" (p159). The home that Mrs Bardell offers conforms exactly to Lane's description of Dickens's ideal household model:

An essentially modest home, not rich or ostentatious [. . .] but warm, bright, clean, a pattern of good management and homely virtues. Cleanliness is repeatedly insisted upon, as it was in Dickens's own domestic arrangements at all periods of his life. [. . .] Domestic skill, in short, is one of the essential virtues of a Dickens heroine.⁹⁴

By Michael Slater's reasoning also, Mrs Bardell should present ideal marriage material: "Dickens's presentation of admirable wives does not rise much above the level of efficient housewifery with much emphasis on the creation of neatness and order, comfort, and the provision of plenty of food."⁹⁵ Indeed, such skills are presented as the most effective provocation to matrimony within *The Pickwick Papers*. The interpolated 'Bagman's Tale' that follows the catalogue of Mrs Bardell's domestic attributes, features a similarly widowed landlady whose offer of choice viands to the traveller Tom Snart exacerbates his marital intentions towards her: "His admiration of the widow increased as she spoke. Thoughtful creature! Comfortable provider!" (p194). Mr Pickwick's emphatic rejection through Mrs Bardell of even the most ideal marital scenario provides compelling evidence of Dickens's awareness of the insufficiency of marriage from the very beginning of his novelistic career.

John Glavin produces an interpretation of Pickwick's incarceration as punishment for his refusal to succumb to this most appealing of marriages:

In the second half of the book, society forces Pickwick into prison because he Has chosen Sam instead of a heterosexual alliance with Mrs Bardell. True to himself, he goes, in this case not to Reading Gaol, but to the Fleet.⁹⁶

Glavin unpalatably insists on his own critical aberrance here, positioning this plausible argument as a 'perverse' wilful 'misreading': "Like the novel's famous Fat Boy, 'I wants to make your flesh creep,' by offering [. . .] a boldfaced, and colossal, candid transgression of

⁹⁴ Lane, p155.

⁹⁵ Slater, *Dickens and Women*, p312.

⁹⁶ John Glavin, 'Pickwick on the Wrong Side of the Door', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 22 (1993), pp1-20, p9.

Dickens' text."⁹⁷ This critical persona, infinitely less appealing than the only occasionally repellent Fat Boy, allows Glavin to acknowledge the existence of the text's homoerotics only to deny their relevance to the novel and to withhold legitimacy from those homocentric readings which, as his own work demonstrates, the text can accommodate:

[I]t does not really help to 'out' the novel, as we did a moment back.

Reading the book as a closet homosocial romance tends, ultimately, to reinscribe the erotic categories on which conventional bourgeois sexual scenarios depend.⁹⁸

This particularly insidious brand of homophobic disavowal is of the order that D. A. Miller was quoted as resisting in the previous chapter. Glavin's insistence on the perversity of his [mis]reading is telling about the continuing state of Dickens studies; it exposes the discipline's attempted demarcation of a legitimate space for study, a boundary which firmly excludes homoerotic, especially homocentric, readings. Given the proliferation of Dickens's representations of domestic disaster and discontent in the socially sanctioned spaces of marriage and home, it does indeed seem "perverse" to dismiss those eroticised alternatives to heterosexual disharmony as reinscriptions of "conventional bourgeois sexual scenarios."

The *Pickwick* narrator's careful disclaimer, "we [. . .] beg it to be distinctly understood that we indulge in no hidden sarcasm upon a married life" (p369), is constantly exposed as disingenuous as, comically and poignantly, farcically and melodramatically, the dysfunction of marriage provides the impetus for almost every plot line. Dickens exploits the inclusive structure of this miscellaneous 'novel', which accommodates interpolated tales, multiple genres and a fecundity of diverse characters, to provide a comprehensive survey of marital aversion and discontent. 'Central' incidents include the negotiation of a separation by the flirtatious Mrs Pott and provide numerous opportunities for what Hager has described as the "Wellerisms [from both Sam and his unhappily remarried father] on the subject of that dreaded state of matrimony which abound throughout the novel."⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Ibid., p2.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p11. Glavin goes on, in a totally unsubstantiated sweep across Dickens's life and work, to 'argue' that the identities (heterosexual, homosocial, homosexual) derived from "the sort of person desired" are irrelevant here as "in Dickens's novels, as in most of Dickens's life, a protagonist's primary object of desire always turns out to be the ego ideal [. . .] The Dickensian male from *Pickwick* to John Jasper, yearns not for another but narcissistically for the self."

⁹⁹ Hager, pp18-19.

When the death of Susan releases Mr Weller Senior from his second bout of marital disharmony, he recoils in horror from the attentions of local single women: “It’s a horrid sitiuation. I’m actiwallly drove out o’ house and home by it” (p694). This scenario exactly parallels Pickwick’s panicked retreat from Mr Ben Allen’s aunt:

The truth is that the old lady’s evidently increasing admiration was Mr Pickwick’s principal inducement for going. He thought of Mrs Bardell; and every glance of the old lady’s eyes threw him into a cold perspiration (p642).

Indeed, in their doubled abhorrence towards maritally inclined women, the portly pair of Mr Pickwick and Mr Tony Weller demonstrate the broad scope for heterosexual aversion across class boundaries.¹⁰⁰

Mr Pickwick’s rejection of marriage is illuminated and contextualised by parallel characters, repetitive instances of conjugal discontent and the range of normative to aberrant marital attitudes conveyed through the often gothicised and fantastical mode of the interpolated tales. The first two interpolations offer further examples of marital disaster. ‘The Stroller’s Tale’ presents a husband’s confession of extreme spousal cruelty to his wife. This familiar Dickensian narrative of wifely loyalty despite severe brutality is recast in the next insertion, ‘The Story of the Convict’s Return’. The final interpolation, ‘The Story of the Bagman’s Uncle’, provides a concluding corrective to the tale told much earlier in the narrative by the bagman himself. In ‘A Tale Told by a Bagman’ (the first of these narratives, which are clearly paired through their titular family relationship) Tom Snart’s dream reveals his rival’s bigamous intentions, effecting his successful courtship of the eminently marriageable Bardell-esque landlady. Near the close of the novel, the uncle’s dream has the opposite effect, enabling his rejection of “several eligible landladies” (p659). The uncle fantasises his heroic rescue of an imperilled beautiful young lady, who promptly exacts his promise never to marry anyone but her:

He remained staunch to the great oath he had sworn to the beautiful young Lady refusing several eligible landladies on her account, and died a bachelor at last (p659).

¹⁰⁰ James Kincaid describes this duo as “a kind of unit [. . .] the first two points in the trinity of flesh that defines the erotic reading of this novel; Tony Weller, Mr Pickwick and the Fat Boy” [‘Fattening Up on Pickwick’, *Novel*, 25 (1992), pp235-244, p243].

This final dream comprises a mysteriously underdetermined prohibition against marriage, which prevents the uncle from connubially converting his apparently “great admiration for bright eyes, and sweet faces, and pretty legs and feet” (p653) into the only socially acceptable context for sexuality. The uncle’s employment of his phantasmal commitment as an ‘explanation’ for his perceived failure to marry demonstrates the cultural demand that bachelors justify their single status. The Bagman eagerly and anxiously emphasises his uncle’s complicity with heterosexual models of desire, reiterating the uncle’s penchant for kissing barmaids (p657) and repeatedly insisting that the uncle’s bachelor status has no hereditary impact on his own heterosexual virility: “In short he was fond of the whole sex. It runs in our family, gentleman – so am I” (p653).

The opposite marital effects of these two dreams condense Mr Pickwick’s own trajectory away from normative marital expectation towards a justification and celebration of an alternative, intensely hetero-resistant pattern of living, offered by bachelorhood. As McCuskey puts it, “weddings do provide occasion for much merrymaking among the Pickwickians, but the novel leaves little doubt that bachelorhood is to be greatly preferred to married life.”¹⁰¹ Pickwick responds with a horror manifest in repeated references to “cold perspiration” (reiterated in the encounter with Ben Allen’s aunt, p642) whenever he meets with a potential partner. His abhorrence for marriageable females is most comically dramatised in the bedroom farce at The Great White Horse Inn. Here Pickwick mistakenly goes to bed in the wrong room, discovering too late that he has mistaken Miss Witherfield’s sleeping quarters for his own:

Mr Pickwick almost fainted with horror and dismay. Standing before the Dressing glass, was a middle-aged lady in yellow curl-papers, busily engaged in brushing what ladies call their ‘back hair’ [. . .] ‘I never met with anything so awful as this’ thought poor Mr Pickwick, the cold perspiration starting to drop upon his nightcap. ‘Never, this is fearful’ (p301).

Indeed, other characters’ conceptions of Mr Pickwick’s heterosexual aversion form a comedic staple to the entire narrative. Humour is generated from the evident divergence of Mr Pickwick from the amorous stereotype of the ladies’ man, the suggestion that he is

¹⁰¹ McCuskey, p251.

“looking after the girls” is followed by a “roar of laughter” (p178), and the reader can enjoy the irony of Magnus’s assumption that Mr Pickwick is a jilted lover, “Eh? Ah! Sly, Mr Pickwick, sly” (p298).

The comedy arising from Pickwick’s heterosexual aversion is, however, carefully buttressed by a more serious framework of statements that position Mr Pickwick’s refusal of compulsory heterosexuality as central to his sense of self. Mr Winkle, even in his flurried state, is able to commit firmly to the official record of the trial that Pickwick had never “contemplated matrimony” – “Oh no; certainly not” (p461). Pickwick himself provides an equally emphatic message in his response to the question of whether he has ever proposed: “‘Never’, said Mr Pickwick with great energy, ‘never’” (p314). At the close of the novel the social and generic expectation of Pickwick’s personal marital conclusion is “strenuously” quashed for a final time:

Some (among whom was Mr Tupman) were disposed to think that Mr Pickwick contemplated a matrimonial alliance, but this idea the ladies strenuously repudiated (p748).

Although Pickwick himself succeeds in maintaining bachelor status, traditional readings have none-the-less perceived the close of the novel as a recapitulation to conventional domesticity:

The end of *Pickwick*, with its comic reconciliation and celebration of multiple marriages, suggests that *Pickwick* has been a domestic novel with a traditional marriage plot all along [. . .] Pickwick’s release from the Fleet is a pact with such a plot, a pact that transforms the bachelor Pickwick, who stands as a figure of transgression in a society that seems to insist on the nuclear patriarchal family, into Cupid, a transcendental facilitator of marriages.¹⁰²

Gina Marlene Dorre has recently reiterated the popular belief that Pickwick’s “orchestration of the proper couplings of two of his companions, which sees them into happy marriages, verifies his work as a patriarch and resolves the menace of his potentially transgressive sexuality.”¹⁰³ However, the novel’s final employment of marriage plotting

¹⁰² Mara Fein, ‘The Politics of Family in *The Pickwick Papers*’, *ELH*, 61 (1994), pp363-379, p374.

¹⁰³ Gina Marlene Dorre, ‘Handling the “Iron Horse”: Dickens, Travel and Derailed Masculinity in *The Pickwick Papers*’, *Nineteenth Century Studies*, 16 (2002), pp1-19, p10.

firmly re-emphasises the transgressive nature of Pickwick's bond with his servant. The mutual fidelity of this final couple is couched in terms that unmistakably echo the marriage ceremony:

On this, as on all other occasions, he is invariably attended by the faithful Sam, between whom and his master, there exists a steady and reciprocal attachment, which nothing but death will sever (p754).

McCuskey suggests that this triumphant finale is only possible because the erotics of Pickwick and Sam's relationship have already been carefully contained. He argues that their intimacy is firmly differentiated from the provocative relationship between Alfred Jingle and Job Trotter, which is the locus for explicit articulations of anxiety about the boundaries of male friendship. As McCuskey argues, the difficulty of categorising this relationship "causes a great deal of confusion and anxiety in the novel. No one can be sure if the two men are master and servant or not; Sam refers to Jingle as 'friend or master, or whatever he is' and Lowten, the legal assistant, similarly terms Job 'that servant, or friend, or whatever he is.'"¹⁰⁴ Job's self-denying insistence that he accompany his friend to begin a new and arduous life in Demerara provokes Lowten to the novel's most open representation of homophobic anxiety:

'He says that he's the only friend he's ever had, and he's attached to him, and all that. Friendship's a very good thing in its way; we are all very friendly and comfortable at the Stump, for instance, over our grog, where every man pays for himself, but damn hurting yourself for anybody else, you know! No man should have more than two attachments – the first to number one, and the second to the ladies; that's what I say – ha ha!' (p701)

McCuskey is unconvincing in his attempt to demonstrate that the novel ensures that this type of suspicion is "deflected away from Pickwick's and Sam's attachment to each other."¹⁰⁵ To distinguish responses to this partnership from the anxious attempts to establish the boundaries of the friendship between Job and Jingle, McCuskey cites Mr Magnus's uncertainty about whether their relationship is one of friendship, quoting Pickwick's equivocal response: "'Not exactly a friend', replied Mr Pickwick in a low tone.

¹⁰⁴ McCuskey, p263.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

‘The fact is, he is my servant, but I allow him to take a good many liberties’” (p293). This exchange, however, better serves to illustrate the similarly permeable boundaries, and parallel difficulties of recognising and defining the parameters, of both pairings. Indeed, the overlaps in plotting suggest that these two couples are carefully doubled. When Jingle is committed to the Fleet, Job voluntarily follows him in a parallel expression of fidelity to that so movingly effected by Sam Weller several chapters before:

Following close at his [Jingle’s] heels, came Mr Job Trotter, in the catalogue of whose vices, want of faith and attachment to his companion could at all events, find no place (p605).¹⁰⁶

This exact repetition of Sam’s response to Pickwick’s imprisonment is powerfully conveyed in the image of the two-by-two procession through the jail of Pickwick and Jingle, followed by Sam and Job (p606).

Pickwick’s final acts of benevolent family formation are not, as previous approaches have tended to suggest, exclusively focused on effecting conventional marriage. Pickwick also invests heavily in the establishment of Jingle and Job’s new life together, ignoring his solicitor’s disapproval of what he views as a misplaced generosity – “You have already lost upwards of fifty pounds” (p703) – to fund their joint emigration to the West Indies. His own unconventional quasi marital union with Sam, in the much celebrated domesticity of the Dulwich villa where “everything was so beautiful” (p751), presents another alternative to the conventional family. Glavin has seen the arrival of Sam’s wife, who becomes housekeeper, and their children as militating against “any simplistically homoerotic reading of this structure.”¹⁰⁷ However, the family of choice that Dickens establishes around Pickwick is, as this thesis is committed to demonstrating, typical of his complex portrayal of non-normative desires, expressed and lived within a heterosexist society through diverse adaptations and appropriations of conventional marital and family structures.

A Horror of ‘Him’: Female Marital Resistance and Dickens’s Independent Women

Similarly at odds with the contemporary domestic ideology that positions marriage as central to responsible citizenship is Dickens’s representation of powerful, unmarried

¹⁰⁶ Job’s presence at the Fleet is clearly voluntary, as he is able to run errands outside; see p621.

¹⁰⁷ Glavin, p13.

women. As Brenda Ayres has argued, the assumption that Dickens valorises a conventional model of home is challenged by the fact that “many women [. . .] succeed outside domesticity.” His fiction “produces some women who are independent and can survive in the world without a man, a situation that definitely threatens the social ordering of man and woman in domesticity.”¹⁰⁸ The previous chapter’s consideration of the collaborative partnerships offered by publican Miss Potterson and independent traveller Miss Wade, suggests further connections between the unconventional households of unmarried women and female homoerotics.

Given the pervasiveness of derogatory attitudes to spinsterhood during the period of his career, Dickens’s depictions of successfully independent unmarried women present a forceful counter to hegemonic domestic ideology. Whilst cultural anxieties and suspicions clustered around the figure of the volitional bachelor, a woman’s single status, though considered deviant, was rarely regarded as a matter of choice, but rather, as Boone has put it, “a condition of unfortunate circumstance and constriction”:

Victorian society could excuse its disappointed old maids their status under the assumption that these ‘redundant women’ [. . .] would have married if given half a chance [. . .] It had little pity and few kind words for the woman who claimed her independence from men and marriage as a personal right.¹⁰⁹

This gendered differentiation in the treatment of the unmarried is apparent in Wilkie Collins’s journalism. Whilst Collins celebrates bachelorhood, his critique of marriage operates very differently in ‘My Spinsters’. A bullish narrative voice advertises “as an amateur matrimonial agent having a few choice spinsters to dispose of”, and the article reads as a quasi auction catalogue for the marital marketing of various “lots” of single women.¹¹⁰ Though ‘My Spinsters’ parodies the mandatory nature of marriage, the piece offers no suggestion that any alternatives were available to women. In this era the derogatory term ‘old maid’ was coined (the OED lists 1831 as the first use) and the eponymous card game, which “reflects the spinster’s definition as half of an unmatched

¹⁰⁸ Brenda Ayres, *Dissenting Women in Dickens’s Novels: The Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1998), p3.

¹⁰⁹ Boone, p278.

¹¹⁰ Wilkie Collins, ‘My Spinsters’, *Household Words*, 23 August 1856, XIV, pp120-126, p120.

pair”, was invented.¹¹¹ Similarly, in America at this time, “kernels of unpopped corn [were] called Old Maids.”¹¹² As Martha Vicinus has documented, “it was widely believed that any marriage was better than being an old maid.”¹¹³ Women who elected not to marry were regarded as failures, or worse, as in Theodore Roosevelt’s hysterical rhetoric:

The woman who deliberately avoids marriage is in effect a criminal against the race, and should be an object of contemptuous abhorrence by all healthy people.¹¹⁴

Such imputations of deviance reflected a panic, parallel to that surrounding bachelors, about the “sexual independence of women implied by celibacy.”¹¹⁵ Those actual and fictional Victorian figures of the volitional spinster and bachelor had sexual identities based on a refusal to ‘do’ standardised heterosexuality. The desires of those who were not confined by the compulsory heterosexuality of marriage presented an unpredictable and threatening alternative to the only socially approved context for sexuality.

Despite the particular taboo on women’s conjugal resistance, Dickens’s novels offer a wealth of representations of powerful female marital aversion. *Our Mutual Friend*, for example, depicts Jenny Wren’s ferocity towards ‘him’, her hypothetical future husband: “no intentions were stronger in her breast than the various trials and torments that were, in the fullness of time, to be inflicted upon ‘him’” (p233). Georgiana Podsnap’s antipathy to all potential suitors is even more pronounced: “I wouldn’t have anybody say anything to me in that way for I don’t know how many thousand pounds [. . .] I couldn’t bear to have anything of that sort going on with myself. I should beg and pray to have the person taken away and trampled upon” (p257). So “desperate” is she to avoid the courtship rituals inflicted by her family and evade the marital pairing to which they tend, that in a particularly black comic mode she fantasises murdering her opposite number at quadrilles:

¹¹¹ Maryhelm C. Harmon, ‘Old Maids and Mansions: The Barren Sisters of Hawthorne, Dickens and Faulkner’ in *Aging and Identity: A Humanities Perspective*, ed. by Sara Deats and Lagretta Lenker (London and Connecticut: Praeger, 1999), pp103-114, p104.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1985), p13. The *Saturday Review* described unmarried women as having “failed in business, and no social reform can prevent such failures”, 12 November 1859, quoted by Vicinus, p3.

¹¹⁴ Quoted by Boone, p278.

¹¹⁵ Vicinus, p31.

“If I was wicked enough – and strong enough – to kill anybody, it should be my partner” (p140).¹¹⁶

These passionate expressions of heterosexual aversion are only equalled by a strength of feeling for the female friend to whom they are confided. Jenny Wren’s love for Lizzie and Georgiana’s deep affection for Sophronia Lammle sharply contrast to their antipathy towards any prospective husband. The homoerotically suggestive disparity between intense female friendship and heterosexual repugnance is at variance with a cultural expectation that such friendships between women would provide an appropriate training for marriage. These intimate relationships, that allow the expression of a disgust for any marital partner, clearly disrupt the ideal of a ‘natural’ transition from female friend to husband.

The helplessness, however, of Georgina’s fervent prayer that an approaching partner might “keep away, keep away, keep away!” (p141) demonstrates the limitations of female volition in a period when spinsterhood was regarded even more pejoratively than bachelorhood. With the bold exceptions of several spirited independent unmarried female characters, Dickens’s fiction reflects a contemporary reality in which women of all classes were expected to marry, and had few alternative options. Dickens, however, refuses to collude with the widespread contemporary belief that marriage was a woman’s emotional destiny, and her ultimate self-fulfilment. He consistently establishes intense female friendships in opposition to marriage, exploiting contemporary anxieties about the appropriate limit of female friendship to explore an erotic tension between the love of intimate friends and the cultural expectation that such bonds will ‘naturally’ dissolve on a woman’s wedding day, giving way to wifely loyalties and heterosexual desire.

¹¹⁶ Rosa Bud in *Edwin Drood* (1870) exhibits a similar antipathy to courtship rituals. She resists her impending arranged marriage to Edwin, immediately confiding to her new friend and female protector, Helena, that it is “so ridiculous” to be disposed of in this way [Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (London: Penguin, 2002), p69. All further references are to this edition and are given in parentheses within the text]. She even refuses to dance with other girls at school who impersonate her fiancé “because she was so tired of [him]” (p28). As Ayres has argued, marriage is not “Rosa’s woman’s dream; it is her dread” (p109).

The Erotics of Female 'Romantic Friendship'

Relationships, actual and literary, between women in the nineteenth century have been most often discussed in terms of loving, so-called 'romantic friendships'. Traditionally, the discursive legacy has contributed to a rejection of the erotic component of romantic friendship. The most prominent theorists of Victorian female friendship, Lillian Faderman and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg both argue for the historical acceptability of romantic friendships by understating the conflicts generated and anxieties raised by such relationships. Faderman insists on the permissibility of "women's intimate relationships [which . . .] were universally encouraged in centuries outside of our own."¹¹⁷ She states that society condoned intense female attachments rather than viewing "them as disruptive of the social structure", and Smith-Rosenberg asserts that such love was considered "both socially acceptable and fully compatible with heterosexual marriage."¹¹⁸ Despite both theorists' careful selection of primary material, the biographies used also demonstrate the ways such friendships made conventional courtship and marriage hugely problematic for both the affianced woman and her intimate friend. Faderman and Smith-Rosenberg's references to female trauma experienced at the marriage of an intimate friend, suggest the difficulty of maintaining an erotically drained account of intense female friendship. Indeed, the erotic component of female friendship obtrudes in even those studies which seek to deny its existence.

Recent explorations of female intimacy have been marked by their pioneering departures from the asexual model. Marylynne Diggs convincingly foregrounds those presentations of female relationships occluded by a reliance on the romantic friendship paradigm, emphasising "both the pathologizing and the resistant discourses that emerged [. . .] well before the turn of the century [. . .] The tidy division between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries misrepresents the varieties of representation and, most importantly resistance occurring in the United States throughout the nineteenth century."¹¹⁹ In her study of the

¹¹⁷ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), p1.

¹¹⁸ Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: Women's Press, 1981), p16; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1985), p59.

¹¹⁹ Marylynne Diggs, 'Romantic Friends or a "Different Race of Creatures"? The Representation of Lesbian Pathology in Nineteenth Century America', *Feminist Studies*, 21.2 (1995), pp317-340, p320.

representation of female friendship in early nineteenth-century Britain, Lisa Moore identifies an ever present “tension between ‘romantic friendship’ and female homosexuality.” She describes that tension “as a basic, if sometimes unstated, cultural assumption”, and argues that the category “romantic friendship” has the capacity “not only to manage and contain women’s non-marital desires and their representations but also to incite and sometimes fulfil them.”¹²⁰

Moore also gives an especially resonant example of the perception of sexual intimacy as a likely component of female romantic friendship. She cites Anne Lister’s diary record of a visit to the famous cohabiting friends, the Ladies of Llangollen, in which Lister responds to the question of whether their relationship “had always been platonic”:

I cannot help thinking that surely it was not platonic. Heaven forgive me, but I look within myself and doubt. I feel the infirmity of our nature and hesitate to pronounce such attachments uncemented by something more tender still than friendship.¹²¹

Lister’s appreciation of the overlap between female friendship and homoeroticism in the early nineteenth century demonstrates the limitations of scholarship that seeks to ignore or deny sexual practices between women before 1900.

“Fully Compatible with Heterosexual Marriage”?: “I feel towards you much more like a lover than a female friend”

Smith-Rosenberg’s assertion that such friendships were “fully compatible with heterosexual marriage” is directly opposed in nineteenth-century correspondence between women by constant equations of female friend with male lover, and the prioritising of this relationship over heterosexual alternatives. Dickens’s fiction reflects his awareness of the potential parity of feeling experienced by a woman’s male suitor and her female friend. He is sensitive to the emotional and homoerotic loss that many women experienced in the compulsory ‘transition’ from female friendship to marriage.

¹²⁰ Lisa Moore, “‘Something More Tender Still than Friendship’: Romantic Friendship in Early Nineteenth Century England”, *Feminist Studies*, 18 (1992), pp449-520, p500, p517.

¹²¹ *I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Anne Lister, 1791-1840*, ed. by Helena Whitbread (London: Virago, 1988), p210. Quoted by Moore, p513.

Faderman has positioned a relationship between two of Dickens's acquaintances, Geraldine Jewsbury and Jane Carlyle, as paradigmatic of the asexual 'romantic friendship' model she favours. Jewsbury and Carlyle's friendship was well known to Dickens, who met both women socially through a network of shared friends.¹²² Although Faderman's 'romantic' thesis leads her to downplay the conflict between this relationship and each woman's efforts to fulfilment the compulsory social role of wife, Geraldine's letters to Jane clearly demonstrate the direct impact that her feelings for Jane had on her willingness to pursue marital schemes. She persistently casts one of them in the role of male lover, writing "I feel to love you more and more every day, and you will laugh, but I feel towards you much more like a lover than a female friend."¹²³ Several months later the practical implications of this feeling became clear as Geraldine emotionally prioritised Jane over her male suitor, whom they call her 'new friend':

This last year has been the best I ever had [. . .] I have found you, and now I wonder how I ever lived without you, and it is strange, but you are of infinitely more worth and importance in my eyes than 'my new friend'.

You come nearer to me; I don't feel towards you as if you were a woman.¹²⁴

This privileging of love between women as superior to that offered by a male suitor had socially threatening consequences in the later Victorian period, when greater numbers of women had the financial independence that enabled them to reject marriage proposals. In the 1870s Constance Maynard, an entrepreneur of female education, turned down an offer of marriage explicitly because of her preference for the alternative love offered her by intimate friend and fellow teacher, Louisa Lumsden:

As I put on my cloak and set off to school I used to hug myself and think, 'now I know what love is!' and anything Dr Robertson offered seemed timid and colourless in comparison.¹²⁵

¹²² He respected their individual talents: he particularly wanted Jane Carlyle to attend his reading of *The Chimes*, feeling that her judgment "would be invaluable" [Fred Kaplan, *Dickens*, p177]. He placed a similar value on Geraldine Jewsbury's writing, as his 1850 letter scouting her for *Household Words* demonstrates [Charles Dickens to Geraldine Jewsbury, February 1850, rpt. in *Selections from the Letters of Geraldine Endor Jewsbury to Jane Welsh Carlyle*, ed. by Mrs Alexander Ireland (London: Longmans, 1892), px]. They continued to correspond about Geraldine's submissions to the periodical throughout the early 1850s [see Susanne Howe, *Geraldine Jewsbury: Her Life and Errors* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1935)].

¹²³ *Geraldine Endor Jewsbury to Jane Welsh Carlyle*, 29 Oct 1841, *Letters*, p39.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1 Jan 1842, p43.

¹²⁵ Constance Maynard, *Autobiography*, part 4, May 1877 (Unpublished, Westfield College Archives), p223. Thanks to Queen Mary and Westfield College for permission to quote this material.

Dickens's familiarity with actual female friendship pairings, such as that enjoyed by Geraldine Jewsbury and Jane Carlyle, contributed to the credibility of his fictional depictions of similar relationships. His exploration of the tension between female friendship and marriage was found resonant by both British and American women readers. Emily Dickinson admired Dickens, and when, after years of intimate friendship with Emily, Sue Gilbert became engaged to Emily's brother (Austin Dickinson), Emily found a parallel for her uncomfortable new position in Dickens's fiction.¹²⁶ She equated herself with Julia Mills, the go-between of *David Copperfield* (1850):

Miss Mills, that is, Miss Julia, never *dreamed* of the depths of *my*
clandestinity, and if I stopped to think of the figure I was cutting,
it would be the last of me.¹²⁷

Like Dickinson, Julia Mills colludes in assisting the match that occasions her pain. The hero, when separated from his intended bride, resorts to mediated accounts of Dora provided by her "bosom friend", Julia Mills (p445). Miss Mills readily conspires to share the journal she maintains about her relationship with Dora – "for the more exact discharge of the duties of friendship" (p517) – with her friend's sanctioned male suitor. David describes Julia Mills's journal as "her sympathetic pages" (p514), repeatedly articulating the parity of their attraction to Dora:

The sun shone Dora, and the birds sang Dora. The south wind blew Dora,
and the wild flowers in the hedges were all Doras to a bud. My comfort is,
Miss Mills understood me. Miss Mills alone could enter into my feelings
thoroughly (p447).

In daily entries intended to be read to or by David, Julia Mills demonstrates the specifically physical aspect of their mutually desiring responses to a shared ideal of Dora. She employs possessive constructions such as "my sweet D[ora]" and provides minute details of Dora's physical appearance, including "beautiful in pallor" and "slight tinge of damask revisiting cheek" (p518). Julia's construction of an erotic account is legitimised by the assumed male reader, whose sanctioned desire for the mutually beloved female make such expression permissible. Hilary Schor observes this parity between Julia and David, which becomes

¹²⁶ Dickinson recorded her reading of *Bleak House* as it arrived in monthly parts in letters to her particular friend, Sue Gilbert [*The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Thomas Johnson and Theodora Ward, 3 vols (Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1958), I, 5 April 1852, p195].

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 12 March 1853, p229.

visible when the reader refuses to privilege David's attachment as the more sincere, or to collude with David's interpretation of Julia's affection as comic:

It is easy to dismiss Julia's ramblings as sentimental trash, a site of excess in the novel, but what is the difference between that and David's narcissistic rambling [. . .] Which romantic autobiographer is being mocked here?¹²⁸

Julia Mills's consistent use of abbreviations enables imaginative physical substitutions similar to those employed in the deliberate gender ambiguity of actual mid nineteenth-century correspondence between women. Emily Dickinson, for example, utilises substitution to enable a homoerotic transposition of male for female body. In a letter to her brother about an evening spent with Sue in his absence, shortly after his engagement to Sue was announced, Dickinson writes: "I have taken *your place* Saturday evening, since you have been away, but I will give it back to you as soon as you get home" (original emphasis).¹²⁹ In *David Copperfield*, Julia Mills designates herself as 'J. M.' and Dora's much petted and adored dog Jipp as 'J'. Julia's emphasis on those incidents in which J[ipp] receives Dora's physical attention suggests her imaginative slippage of the designated 'J'. Her potential self denotation as 'J' explains Julia's mysterious sense of poignancy when "D fondled J. Associations thus awakened opened floodgates of sorrow" (p518). Julia's imagined substitution of her own body for that of the excessively fondled Jipp, also provides a rationale for the inclusion of a quickly resolved, and otherwise irrelevant dog-napping. This incident in which Jipp is snatched allows Julia to fantasise Dora's pain at parting with her:

Search made in every direction. No J. D weeping bitterly, and inconsolable.
[. . . On restoration, D] embraces J and sobs herself to sleep (p518).

Despite David's insistence on treating Miss Mills's emotions as farcical, he describes her as "more than usually pensive" on the announcement of his engagement to Dora: "She gave us her blessing, and the assurance of her lasting friendship, and spoke to us, generally as became a Voice from the Cloister" (p452). This sombre image of chastity emphasizes the isolation experienced by many women when their special friend became affianced. Importantly, Emily Dickinson experienced the relevance of Dickens's description in *David*

¹²⁸ Hilary Schor, *Dickens and the Daughter of the House* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), p11.

¹²⁹ *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, I, 12 April 1853, p241.

Copperfield of the painful and lonely position one romantic friend was placed in by the courtship and imminent marriage of the other. The parity between Julia Mills's and David's attraction to Dora, is paralleled by Dickinson's figuration of herself as a lover who is interchangeable with Sue's heterosexual suitor. Both accounts bespeak the extreme difficulty of reconciling such friendships with marriage.

Dickinson expressed her difficulty in accepting her friend's engagement by refusing to relinquish her socially disruptive strategy of re-gendering herself and Sue. Dickinson, like Jewsbury, habitually positioned herself and Sue alternately as male lover:

I fancy I see you coming [. . .] I hide behind the chair, I think I will
surprise you, I grow too eager to see you [. . .] Why, Susie, it seems to
me as if my absent lover was coming home so soon – and my heart
must be so busy, making ready for him.¹³⁰

Significantly, Dickinson here transposes Sue and herself into a heterosexual romantic scenario, which again resonates with that presented by Dickens in *David Copperfield*, a novel which was clearly contributing to her imaginative structures at this time. At the crisis in their courtship when David seeks permission for his suit from Dora's aunts, Dora indulges the same desire to hide herself from her beloved:

I found my blessed darling stopping her ears behind the door, with her
dear little face against the wall [. . .] Oh! How beautiful she was in her
black frock, and how she sobbed and cried at first, and would not come
out from behind the door! How fond we were of one another, when she
did come out at last (p555).

Geoffrey Carter notes the strong parallel between this description and that of the reunion of intimate female friends in *Bleak House*. When Ada is reunited with Esther, who has suffered a long period of illness, Esther "hides behind a door, just as Dora hides away from David Copperfield."¹³¹ The combination of anticipation, eagerness and anxiety with which Esther waits for Ada, resonates with the same referents in Dickinson's account of waiting for Sue, written less than a year before the publication of this section of *Bleak House*.

¹³⁰ *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, I, 27 June 1852, p215.

¹³¹ Carter, 'Sexuality and the Victorian Artist', p144.

The erotic implications of Dickens's re-gendered transposition, from the suitors of *David Copperfield* to the romantic female friends of *Bleak House*, are observed by Carter :

In the guise of portraying an innocent girl's sisterly altruism, Dickens is, in fact titillating us with a scene of sexual hysteria, set up by weeks of subtly sadistic postponement of gratification.¹³²

Exactly like Dickinson in her letters to Sue, Dickens creates this "postponement of gratification", and simultaneous heightening of erotic anticipation, through a carefully constructed series of epistolary exchanges. The correspondence of Esther with Ada, and Emily Dickinson with Sue, cannily exploit the titillating potential of letters, which, as Terry Eagleton has observed, "concede yet withhold physical intimacy in a kind of artfully prolonged teasing, a courtship which is never consummated."¹³³ During her illness Esther insists on an absolute separation from her beloved friend Ada, employing uncharacteristic hyperbole to ensure this division is maintained:

Now, Charley, when she knows I am ill, she will try to make her way into the room. Keep her out, Charley, if you love me truly, to the last! Charley, if you let her in but once, only to look upon me for one moment as I lie here, I shall die (p504).

Mary Armstrong convincingly attributes this wish to Esther's desirous investment in Ada's perceived physical perfection, arguing that "their separation is necessary to maintain not only Ada's health, but Ada as she is desired by Esther."¹³⁴

Ada is physically excluded from her beloved's presence by closed doors, walls and raised windows; she responds to this blockage of her virtual courtship in the conventional epistolary manner employed by (temporarily) thwarted suitors. Esther firmly initiates this epistolary arrangement, adopting the traditionally female role of avoiding compromise through the careful limitation of physical contact:

At first she [Ada] came very often to the door, and called to me, and even reproached me with sobs and tears; but I wrote her a long letter, saying that she made me anxious and unhappy, and imploring her, as she loved me, and wished my mind to be at peace to come no nearer than the garden. After that

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), p45.

¹³⁴ Armstrong, 'What Can You Two Be Together?', p93.

she came beneath the window, even oftener than she had come to the door (p499).

Dickens also utilises the physical meaning of a letter's existence to provide only the most thinly veiled enactment of homoerotic contact. Epistles become a corporeal substitute for that mutually craved physical contact for which Ada had been "crying at the door, day and night [. . .] praying and imploring to be let in to nurse and comfort" Esther, "and to leave [her] bedside no more" (p556):

I could read the letters that my dear wrote to me every morning and evening, and could *put them to my lips and lay my cheek upon them* with no fear of hurting her (p557, emphasis added).

This mediated contact of Esther's lips and cheek to Ada's bodily representative offers a preparatory permissible enactment of the extreme physical (re)union of these intimate friends. In her anxiety about her altered looks – "I loved my darling so well that I was more concerned for their effect on her than anyone" (p587) – Esther maintains the simultaneous separation and quasi bodily closeness that an epistolary relationship permits. During her retreat at Boythorn's home, Esther receives "a joyful letter, full of such loving anticipation" from Ada (p586), which constitutes the final bodily substitution in preparation for the 'consummation' of the eventual meeting of actual faces, lips and cheeks:

I did not mean to do it, but I ran up-stairs into my room, and hid myself behind the door. There I stood, trembling, even when I heard my darling calling as she came upstairs, 'Esther, my dear, my love, where are you? Little woman, dear Dame Durden!' She ran in, and was running out again when she saw me. Ah, my dear angel girl! the old dear look, all love, all fondness, all affection. Nothing else in it – no, nothing, nothing. O how happy I was, down upon the floor, with my sweet beautiful girl down upon the floor too, holding my scarred face to her lovely cheek, bathing it with tears and kisses, rocking me to and fro like a child, calling me by every tender name that she could think of and pressing me to her faithful heart (p588).

Dickens's expression of sexual attraction between women in this recasting of his own initially heterosexual exchange, reworks exactly the same strategy that Emily Dickinson had already employed in her homoerotic adaptation of the *Copperfield* scene of erotically suspenseful hide and seek.

“I was so lonely, and so blank without her”: Portraying the Pain of Parting

Further powerful evidence for the incompatibility between romantic female friendship and heterosexual marriage emerges from an examination of the psychological distress suffered by one (or often both) female friends, when one of them married. Various biographers have advanced strong arguments that Sue’s marriage caused Emily Dickinson to have what would now be termed a nervous breakdown.¹³⁵ This was by no means an isolated response to the marriage of an intimate friend. Smith-Rosenberg’s study abounds with undeveloped references to one friend’s trauma at the engagement and marriage of her significant female other. In one example a woman marries after twenty-one years of intimate female friendship; the woman left single “underwent a period of extreme anxiety”, writing desperately:

Dearest Darling – How incessantly have I thought of you these eight days
– all today – the entire uncertainty, the distance, the long silence – all are new
features in my separation from you, grievous to be borne [. . .] I have thought
and yearned over you these two days. Are you married I wonder? My dearest
love to you wherever and *whoever* you are.¹³⁶

Faderman tantalisingly proposes that trauma, such as that experienced by Emily Dickinson, can be examined as evidence for the homoeroticism of female romantic friendship.¹³⁷ She fails to develop this suggestion, although in passing she offers further references to this highly particularized anguish. In one instance Faderman describes a woman as “crushed” by her particular friend’s marriage.¹³⁸ A return to Faderman’s biographical sources reveal that the marriage left the single friend “so distressed” that she required an extended trip to a recuperation retreat.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ See especially, Lillian Faderman, ‘Emily Dickinson’s Letters to Sue Gilbert’, *Massachusetts Review*, 18.2 (1977), pp197-225, pp223-225, and John Cody, *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* (Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1971).

¹³⁶ Smith-Rosenberg, p56, quotes Sarah Butler Wistar to Jeannie Field Musgrove, 18 June 1870 [*Correspondence (1855-98)*, Sarah Butler Wistar Papers (Historical Society of Pennsylvania)].

¹³⁷ “What about the evidence that immediately after Sue’s marriage to Austin Dickinson, Emily, who viewed the event with painful ambivalence, had a nervous break down? Emily’s love letters to Sue were not simply an example of Victorian rhetoric, but neither was this a lesbian relationship as such relationships have been lived through much of our century” [Faderman, *Surpassing*, p15].

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p216.

¹³⁹ George MacMichael, *Journey to Obscurity: The Life of Octave Thanet* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1965), p89.

Jonathan Katz's recent survey of 'romantic friendships' between men in nineteenth-century America suggests that intimate male friends could experience similar pain, or at least ambivalence, at the marriage of their friend. Katz offers a particularly suggestive exploration of Abraham Lincoln's response to the fiancé of his closest friend, Joshua Fry Speed:

Evident in Lincoln's response to Speed's engagement are his deep love for Speed and his anger at losing his most intimate male friend to a wife – a common experience of the era's romantic men friends, as other stories show.¹⁴⁰

In one of his variety of bachelor pieces for *Household Words*, Collins developed exactly such a story of the male "shock of losing a dear friend, in order that a bride may gain a devoted husband."¹⁴¹ Adopting the persona of a confirmed "old bachelor", Collins issues an invective against wives that disrupt their husband's closest male intimacies, arguing that "there are other affections, in this world, which are noble and honourable, besides those of conjugal and parental origin."¹⁴² This bachelor is particularly concerned with the "other affection" of extreme romantic friendship between men who "would once have gone to the world's end to serve each other":

I shall never be as fond of any human being again, as I was of that one friend, and, until the beautiful woman came between us, I believe there was nothing in this world that he would not have sacrificed and have done for me. Even while he was courting, I kept my hold on him [. . .] The beautiful woman grudged me my one small corner in his heart, even at that time; but he was true to me – he persisted – and I was the first to shake hands with him when he was a married man. I had no suspicion then that I was to lose him from that moment.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Jonathan Ned Katz, *Love Stories: Sex Between Men Before Homosexuality* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2001), p25. Katz, unfortunately, provides limited reference to evidence from these 'other stories'. However he does quote the hero, Ned, of Frederick Wadsworth's Loring's 1871 novel, *Two College Friends*: "When this war is over, I suppose Tom will marry and forget me. I never will go near his wife – I shall hate her." As Katz suggests, "the fictional Ned's fantasy about Tom's future wife reminds us of Lincoln's real-life response to Speed's fiancée" (pp144-145). Xavier Mayne's early twentieth century study of homosexuality devotes a section to examples of "the anguish of a Uranian when partnerless by marriage." Mayne provides a range of poignant literary and actual accounts of male and female suicides on the marriage of their intimate friend (*The Intersexes*, pp544-552).

¹⁴¹ Collins, 'Bold Words', p506.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p505.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p506.

Whilst these examples suggest that male pain at marital parting also had a cultural currency, in Dickens's carefully gendered representations of male and female marital resistance alternative strategies are employed to denote male responses to marriage, reflecting the gendered disparities in levels of marital volition in the period. Given the even greater social imperative for women to marry, Dickens's depictions of female marital resistance often operate from *within* the culturally compulsory structures of courtship and marriage. Thus, representing women's pain at marital parting becomes a crucial strategy for Dickens's resistance to the concept of marriage as female destiny.

Dickens's fiction offers repeated portrayals of female anguish at the marriage of an intimate friend. Such suffering transcends class barriers, ranging from the pain of Susan Nipper at the marriage of the mistress she adores, to Julia Mills's and Esther Summerson's distress when their intimate friends become Mrs Copperfield and Mrs Carson, respectively. Dickens's novels reflect an experience of romantic friendship as enabling a cherished and reluctantly relinquished intimacy, often in direct contrast to the dearth of erotic and emotional attraction between husband and wife. His sympathetic treatment of such separation as bereavement challenges the assumption that female friendship in this period was always perceived as beneficial marriage preparation. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow famously figured such relationships in his popular 1849 novel, *Kavanagh*, as "a rehearsal in girlhood for the great drama of woman's life."¹⁴⁴ Attention to Dickens's resistance to this view suggests that the frequent quotation of Longfellow as "representative", has established a misleadingly monolithic model for Victorian male understandings of female friendship.¹⁴⁵ Vicinus moves away from this influential account, through an emphasis on the emotional conflicts between intimate friends and closest family:

'Romantic friendship' with another woman was an accepted prelude, even preparation for, marriage, but it was also a subversive outlet for ambitions and hopes that went beyond familiar domestic subjects [. . .] From the very beginning a tension surfaced between the desirability of forming close friendships, and fears of their superseding family claims.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Quoted by, for example, Faderman, *Surpassing*, p170.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p169.

¹⁴⁶ Vicinus, pp34-35.

Domestic employment disqualifies Susan Nipper of *Dombey and Son* (1848) from a standard model of 'romantic friendship' that denotes a relationship between two women of the same (implicitly bourgeois) economic background. Susan occupies an ambivalent position in the collapsing Dombey household, fulfilling the role of mother, nurse, maid, sole companion and only friend through a large part of the novel to the otherwise almost entirely isolated Florence. She develops an intensely romantic attachment to her young mistress, whose marriage provokes an anguish that Susan is unable to conceal. Susan responds to Florence's announcement of her engagement with a "burst of pain, pleasure, pride and grief", a "mixture of compassion, pleasure, tenderness, protection and regret."¹⁴⁷ She is at pains to repress the distress carefully recorded in every catalogue of her response, by "putting constraint upon herself" (p850), but fails entirely to maintain this charade at the ceremony itself, at which she "cannot speak; she only sobs and chokes, and hugs her mistress": "Susan cannot bear that Florence go away with a mournful recollection of her. She had meant to be so different, that she reproaches herself bitterly" (p872). In what has reductively been interpreted as "a scene of pure Dickensian slapstick"¹⁴⁸, she chases the bridal coach in order to finally show Florence a more happy face, and to beg her forgiveness for failing to conceal her sorrow: "'We are all so- so happy now, my dear Miss Floy!' says Susan, with a suspicious catching in her breath, 'You, you won't be angry with me, now. Now *will* you?'" (p873).

The poignancy of these expressions can too easily be obscured by the comic reading usually attributed to this "recognisable Dickensian figure: the feisty, not particularly lovely, faithful woman who is attached by both affections and wages to the beautiful heroine."¹⁴⁹ In her suggestive reading of the female homoerotics of *Dombey*, Mary Armstrong argues that the desire for Florence expressed in Susan Nipper's agony at her wedding is contained and cancelled out by a 'slapstick' representation of this grief:

Her love and attachment for Florence, her hysteria at leaving the Dombey household, her 'fits' at Florence's wedding, are ultimately presented with only the desirous seriousness of the average cartoon.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (London: Penguin, 2002), p843. All further references are to this edition and are given in parentheses within the text.

¹⁴⁸ Armstrong, 'Pursuing Perfection', p292.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p287.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p291.

Armstrong positions Susan's marriage to Florence's other failed suitor, Mr Toots, as central to this comic framing:

Because Susan Nipper's adoration of and love for Florence is redirected through Florence's comic suitor Toots, Susan's passionate attachment is rendered doubly comic and relocated into the frame of the normal, or at least of the generic grotesque.¹⁵¹

Armstrong's 'normalising' of Susan's love coheres with her wider investment in demonstrating that female homoerotics in Dickens are always firmly recouped and redirected into heterosexuality. However, the quotations she chooses to support this model of "heterosexual recovery" through Susan's marriage to Toots, create doubt about the effectiveness of a "recovery" based on mutual attraction to a female beloved. In a similar strategy to that which emphasises the equivalence of David Copperfield's and Julia Mills's feeling for Dora, Toots and Susan are marked as having an absolute parity of (unfulfilled) desire for Florence.

Susan is uniquely able to fully share her pain at Florence's marriage with him: "She did, indeed, inform Mr Toots privately, that she was only 'keeping up', for the time, and that when it was all over, and Miss Dombey was gone, she might be expected to become a spectacle distressful; and Mr Toots did also express that it was his case too, and that they would mingle their feelings to together; but she never otherwise indulged her private feelings" (p851). Reciprocally, Toots benefits from the "consolation" (p845) and "commiseration" (p855) that Susan's identical feelings equip her to offer. Indeed, their marriage is based on the condition that Florence remains Susan's emotional priority, and that Susan will continue to serve her despite her new moneyed position:

She has always said – she said before we were married, and has said to this day – that whenever you came home, – she'd come to you in no dress but the dress she used to serve you in, for fear she might seem strange to you, and you might like her less [. . .] My dear Miss Dombey, she'll be your maid again, your nurse, all that she ever was and more. There's no change in her (p927).

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p292.

As Armstrong acknowledges, “their marriage is not based on love of each other but on mutual love for (and mutual loss of) Florence.”¹⁵² Armstrong’s citation, then, of another section re-emphasising the extent to which Toots and Susan share a specifically physical appreciation of Florence, hardly offers a convincing demonstration of the containment of homoerotics: “She knows that there’s nothing on earth I wouldn’t do for Miss Dombey. She knows that I consider her the most beautiful, the most amiable, the most angelic of her sex. What is her observation upon that? The perfection of sense. ‘My dear, you’re right. I think so too’” (p945).¹⁵³

Whilst, as Armstrong suggests, the intensity of Susan’s loss is diffused through a comic framing of her still powerfully emotive statements, a consideration of Dickens’s wider presentation of such painful marital partings offers a more serious framework for Susan Nipper’s tragedy. In *Bleak House* Dickens offers a darker rendering of the emotions experienced by Esther when Ada marries, again reflecting contemporary female experiences of the trauma caused by this situation. Esther’s compulsion to return to Ada and Richard’s rooms on their first wedded night together is often seen as one of the novel’s most uncomfortable moments. Carter’s scandalized response is typical:

This has to make a modern reader feel very uncomfortable; Esther is listening, tip-toe, outside the wedding chamber on the wedding night! At the best, this is grotesque interference in other people’s privacy; at worst it is voyeurism masquerading as selfless love.¹⁵⁴

Yet, when placed alongside firsthand accounts of women’s actual experiences of their particular friend’s marriage, Esther’s compulsive return to Ada offers a convincing enactment of frequently suffered emotional yearning:

It was only natural that I should not be quite accustomed to the loss of my Darling yet. Three or four hours were not a long time, after years [. . .] I so longed to be near her, and taking some sort of care of her, that I determined to go back in the evening, only to look up at her windows (p789).

Esther’s shock at the sudden severance of her access to Ada resonates with nineteenth-century women’s personal recording of conflict between the horror of their sudden loss and

¹⁵² Ibid., p292

¹⁵³ Quoted by Armstrong, *ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ Carter, p143.

an attempt to rationalize the situation as inevitable. Emily Dickinson writes to her friend Emily Fowler, five days after Fowler's marriage: "I knew you would go away, for I know the roses are gathered, but I guessed not yet, not till by expectation we had become resigned."¹⁵⁵ These sentiments are echoed in Louisa Lumsden's reaction to Constance's receipt of a proposal:

It is all right, I knew it must come – but *so* soon? All my life is altered for me
[. . .] Oh let me grieve, it is a hard, a cruel blow.¹⁵⁶

Dickens expresses the darkness of Esther's loss by drawing on the same semantic fields and rhetorical devices used in contemporary women's first hand accounts:

I was so lonely, and so blank without her, and it was so desolate to be
going home with no hope of seeing her there, that I could get no comfort
for a little while, as I walked up and down in a dim corner sobbing and
crying (p789).

The term "lonely" recurs repeatedly in the letters Emily Dickinson wrote after Sue's engagement. Dickinson compares her blankness and desolation in Sue's absence to the awareness of a stone "that it is very cold, or [a] block, that it is silent, where once 'twas warm and green."¹⁵⁷ The sense of isolation which pervades her correspondence of this time culminated in a desperate appeal in one of her final letters to Sue before a break in their correspondence. The sudden termination in what had previously been a regular exchange of letters has been convincingly attributed to Emily's breakdown:

Susie – it is a little thing to say how lone it is – anyone can do it, but to
wear the loneliness next your heart for weeks, when you sleep and when
you wake, ever missing something, *this*, all cannot say [. . .] I would paint
a portrait which would bring the tears, had I canvass for it, and the scene

¹⁵⁵ *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 21 December 1853, p267.

¹⁵⁶ Constance Maynard, *Green Book*, No. 14, 27 May 1877 (Unpublished, Westfield College Archives), pp193-194. Jane Austen records a similar ambivalence towards the impending marriage of her dearly beloved niece, experiencing a horror of the husband-to-be: "Oh what a loss it will be when you are married. You are too agreeable as a Niece. I shall hate you when your delicious play of Mind is all settled down into conjugal and maternal affections. Mr J. W. frightens me. – He will have you. – I see you at the altar." Austen goes on to temper this extreme reaction with a more realistic acceptance of the match: "Do not imagine that I have any real objection [. . .] I only so not like you shd [sic.] marry anybody" [Jane Austen to Fanny Knight, 20 and 21 February 1817, *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. by Deidre Le Faye, 2nd edn (London: The Folio Society, 2003), p329].

¹⁵⁷ *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, August 1854, p304. See letters written to Austin Dickinson on 7 May and 19 June 1853 for further references to loneliness (p249, p255).

should be solitude, and the figures – solitude – and the lights and shades each a solitude. I could fill a chamber with landscapes so lone, men should pause and weep there.¹⁵⁸

As the heavy repetition of this letter suggests, such pain can barely be expressed in the realistic language of everyday use. Dickens and the actual women discussed here liken the separation of romantic friends to the extremes of earthly experience, equating the loss to bereavement. Louisa Lumsden's poignant request, "Oh let me grieve", parallels Geraldine Jewsbury's conception of her estrangement with Jane Carlyle as "only the precursor of that greater change which will take us away forever."¹⁵⁹ These usages cohere with Elisabeth Bronfen's theory that representations of death primarily operate as "a signifier of lack [. . .] itself unmeasurable, certain only in its negativity."¹⁶⁰

Death imagery pervades Esther's presentation of her discovery of Ada's marriage. On the way to Richard's lodgings (soon to be Ada's marital home) Esther imagines that "there were more funerals passing along the dismal pavements, than [she] had ever seen before", and describes their arrival at "Richard's name in great white letters on a hearse-like panel" (p783). Clearly such references also prefigure Richard's impending death, but their applicability to Esther's psychological state is clarified by the interpellation of a reference to the death of Joe the crossing sweeper, within the account. Joe and Esther are closely identified, most explicitly through shared illness – before Joe's disease kills him he has passed it on to Esther, whom it permanently scars. The painful death of Joe, with whom Esther is doubled, is suggestive of Esther's psychological trauma at Ada's marriage, and implies an experience of spiritual death akin to Geraldine's Jewsbury's account of separation from her intimate friend as one of the "many deaths we suffer ere we die."¹⁶¹

On Esther's furtive return after dark to the newly-weds' home, she reiterates her morbid perception of the door: "I put my lips to the hearse like panel of the door, as a kiss for my dear" (p790). This macabre description contributes to the consistent gothicisation of this painful visit. Esther emphasizes the "strange", "uncongenial [. . .] overshadowed stony-

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 3 December 1854, p310.

¹⁵⁹ *Selections from the Letters of GEJ to JWC*, January 1858, p166.

¹⁶⁰ Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p72.

¹⁶¹ *Selections from the Letters of GEJ to JWC*, January 1858, p171.

hearted” atmosphere, and the presence of the distinctly vampiric Vholes contributes a fantastical element:

The sight of his lank black figure, and the lonesome air of that nook in the dark, were favourable to the state of my mind. I thought of the youth and love and beauty of my dear girl, shut up in such an ill-assorted refuge, almost as if it were a cruel place (p789).

This gothic mode articulates the horror of a separation, whose pain has become too intense for expression in worldly terms, even those of realistic death. Here, Dickens implements gothic imagery as an effective language of loss, able to convey the combined horror and melancholy of parting. The gothic genre’s established association with extreme emotion facilitates an expression of intense feeling which could not otherwise be articulated. In applying gothic conventions to Esther’s expression of feeling for Ada, Dickens also exploits the genre’s strong connection with prohibited desire.

Emily Dickinson casts her fear of parting with Sue in similarly fantastical terms: “I have thought today of when the ‘bold dragon’ shall bear you [. . .] away, to live in his high mountain – and leave me here alone; and I could have wept bitterly over the only *fancy* of ever being so lone.”¹⁶² She exploits analogous fantasy imagery to demonstrate the misery of division, in her letter to newly married Emily Fowler:

Dear Emily, when it came, and hidden by your veil [. . .] we kissed you [. . .] and went back to our homes, it seemed to me translation, not any earthly thing, and if after a little after you had ridden on the wind, it would not have surprised me.¹⁶³

Esther’s figuration of Ada’s “strange” nuptial environment and Dickinson’s imagined transmutation of her newly married friend represent the absolute cultural disjunction between unmarried and wedded women. The sense of a dramatic, irreversible shift is echoed in conduct book advice offered to intimate female friends on sustaining their relationship after marriage. In *A Woman’s Thoughts About Women* (1858) Dinah Craik insists that such a bond “must change its character, [. . .] be buried alive and come to life

¹⁶² *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 21 January 1852, p168.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 21 December 1853, p277.

again in a totally different form.”¹⁶⁴ In this uncharacteristic move into a metaphorical register, Craik equates the effect of marriage on female friendship to perhaps the most horrific referent in mid nineteenth-century popular imagination, live burial. William Alger employs comparable fatalistic language in *The Friendships of Women* (1868), throughout which he repeatedly observes that “marriage is often *the grave* of feminine friendships” (emphasis added).¹⁶⁵ Alger demonstrates awareness of the extreme suffering occasioned by this death-like separation in his suggestion that after marriage female friendship often “died of a slow consumption.”¹⁶⁶

These conduct writers’ use of the same conceptual schema by which mid nineteenth-century women expressed their anguish, provides further evidence to support and extend critical claims that conduct material of this time articulated growing anxieties about the acceptability of romantic female friendship. Various recent commentators have noted the expression of anxiety about same-sex relationships in mid nineteenth-century conduct books. Sara Putzell-Korab includes such material in her list of “means by which the Victorians learned that woman can love women sexually.”¹⁶⁷ Putzell-Korab emphasises Mrs Craik’s concern with “physical expressions of that love.”¹⁶⁸ Diggs convincingly situates advice texts as a part of the discourse that articulated the “nineteenth-century [. . .] contentious struggle over the definition and representation of a lesbian sexuality”, arguing that such material “often alluded to the appropriate limits of relations between women, of women’s sexual desire, and of sexual and gender variations.”¹⁶⁹ However, Diggs’s argument is limited by her acceptance of previous interpretations of Alger, reading his text as offering “few hints of any social disapprobation” of relationships between women.¹⁷⁰ This positioning of Alger as central to presentations of the acceptability of female friendship is inherited from Smith-Rosenberg’s labelling of Alger’s text as “the most famous example of the romanticization of women’s love for one another as the pinnacle of

¹⁶⁴ Dinah Mulock Craik, *A Woman’s Thoughts About Women* (1858, rpt. London: Pickering and Chatto, 1993), p137.

¹⁶⁵ William Rounseville Alger, *The Friendships of Women* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1868), p19.

¹⁶⁶ Alger, p290.

¹⁶⁷ Sara Putzell-Korab, ‘Passion Between Women in the Victorian Novel’, in *Sexuality and Victorian Literature*, pp180-195, p185.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p182.

¹⁶⁹ Diggs, p321, p323.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p323.

human emotions.”¹⁷¹ In Faderman’s influential account, Alger’s “trivializing view of romantic friendship” encourages male tolerance for inter-female relationships.¹⁷² Though in accordance with Alger’s stated intention of recommending female friendship as a comfortable support and consolation for single women, these readings fail to account for Alger’s almost compulsive inclusion of extended examples of actual women’s extreme responses to separation.

Alger describes several suicides caused by the threatened division of female friends, such as that resulting from a father’s intervention between his sixteen year old daughter and her intimate school-friend: “The two preferred death to separation. They took laudanum, and were found dead in each other’s arms.”¹⁷³ Alger’s discomfort in recounting this scenario is betrayed by his uncomfortable commentary – “there is often something a little grotesque or laughable” in such relationships.¹⁷⁴ Despite this evident dis-ease Alger offers a variety of similar examples, including the highly physical tragedy of Bettine Bratano and intimate friend Canoness Gunderode. Alger reprints sections from their correspondence which reveal Bettine’s intensely erotic response to Gunderode’s threatened suicide:

[Gunderode] hastily opened her gown, and pointed to the spot beneath her beautiful breast. Her eyes sparkled with delight. I could no longer control myself: I broke into loud crying, I fell on her neck, I dragged her down to a seat and sat upon her knee, and wept and kissed her on her mouth, and tore open her dress, and kissed her on the spot where she had learned to reach the heart.¹⁷⁵

Gunderode did commit suicide by drowning, shortly after declaring to Bettine her determination that they should part, which Alger also quotes: “we have been deceived, and do not belong to one another.”¹⁷⁶

Alger’s fascination with women’s extreme responses to their separation and his consistent use of languages of suffering to describe the division of intimate female friends by marriage, is at variance with previous readings of *The Friendships of Women* as both

¹⁷¹ Smith-Rosenberg, p39.

¹⁷² Faderman, *Surpassing*, p162.

¹⁷³ Alger, p271.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, p271.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, p311.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p312.

supporting and perpetuating the unproblematic social acceptance of inter-female intimacy. His preoccupation with the painful aspects of friendships between women detracts from his own declared project of recommending such relationships as both a suitable preparation for marriage and an appropriate consolation for spinsters:

In the lives of women, friendship is, – First, the guide to love; a preliminary stage in the natural development of affection [. . .] It is, in other cases the comforting substitute for love.¹⁷⁷

In their use of fatalistic and gothicised images Alger, Craik and Dickens reveal an appreciation of the pain experienced by intimate female friends on parting. They reveal the tension between such relationships and marriage and betray an anxiety about presenting female friendship as beneficial preparation for becoming a wife. Dickens's sympathetic presentation of the separation of intimate female friends as bereavement belies the current critical attitude that mid-Victorian men perceived such relationships as beneficial, unproblematic heterosexual foreplay. Each of these texts demonstrate the ways in which even those authors most firmly positioned as central proponents of the asexual purity of female romantic friendship bespeak its inherent eroticism.

Dickens's attention to the insufficiency of marriage as female destiny complements his wider representation of domestic diversity. Through the variety of marital resistances discussed in this chapter, Dickens deprivileges the 'conventional' family unit as the most appropriate structure for every individual's emotional and erotic fulfilment. His fiction not only explores the insufficiency of marriage, it also (as the next chapter will elaborate) imagines alternative domestic spaces, and families of choice, able to accommodate those whose desires remain unfulfilled within the strictures of reproductive heterosexuality.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p4.

Chapter Three

Families of Choice: Erotic Triangulation and Bodily Substitution

This chapter continues the interrogation of the familial domestic ideal, investigating the repeated formation in Dickens's novels of distinctly queer families of choice. Observing the lack of exclusive, 'conventional' married couples in Dickens's fiction, Chase and Levenson suggest that "Dickens recoiled before the prospect of the exclusive marriage tie, the withdrawal of the married pair from a broader web of affection. His vision of home [. . .] is incompatible with the isolation of the loving couple, and in this sense the logic of romance is at once an animating force and a perilously false lure."¹ These more extended family units, however, provide alternatives to a strictly heterosexual "logic of romance", accommodating those desires left unfulfilled by marriage. This chapter examines a particular family unit of three – sister/brother/suitor – contending that 'in-lawing' was one of the major strategies through which Dickens and his contemporaries articulated (and in real terms mediated and transferred) same-sex desire. A homoerotic impulse structures multiple formations of same-sex in-law relationships in Dickens's fiction. In Dickens's novels, the in-law motif most often permits articulation of an otherwise unspeakable intimacy between men, by mediating courtship procedures and ultimately physical union through the socially permissible site of a sister's body. This focus on sibling body doubles insists on a corporeal and fleshed understanding of homoerotics.²

The chapter expands Sedgwick's work on Girardian triangles, both drawing on and contesting the model she establishes. It is argued that the triangulation effected by a particular family structure offers a more positive affirmation of same-sex desire than that displayed through the inevitably violent rivalrous triangles that Sedgwick charts. Through cumulative repetition across Dickens's fiction, the strategy of 'in-lawing' gains conceptual ascendancy over the rivalry model.

¹ Chase and Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy*, p91.

² Queer theory is often criticised for removing sex from the body, sterilising the erotics it purports to examine through a rigidly theoretical frame. James Kincaid, for example, justly criticises much existing scholarship on desire as "bloodless and unbodied" (*Fattening Up*, p236).

Thicker than Water: Blood Beyond Rivalry in *Our Mutual Friend*

Whilst Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* has had a hugely enabling impact on gay, lesbian and queer studies, its two chapters on Dickens do the initially useful work of recognising the existence of alternative sexualities within his work, only to insist that Dickens *always* offers such representations from an inherently homophobic perspective.³ In her analysis of *Great Expectations*, *Our Mutual Friend* and *Edwin Drood* Sedgwick focuses on those bonds between men where the intensity of feeling is both mobilised and dramatised by violent "erotic rivalry":

In these male homosocial bonds are concentrated the fantasy energies of compulsion, prohibition, and explosive violence; all are fully structured by the logic of paranoia.⁴

This model of triangular desire, a desire provoked by another's desire *for* the supposed love object rather than *by* that beloved object, is taken from Rene Girard's theory of the innately "imitative nature of desire."⁵ For Girard, mimetic desire is continually exposed by jealousy, an emotion that reveals "an irresistible impulse to desire what others desire, in other words to imitate the desires of others."⁶ Sedgwick explicitly identifies those aspects of Girard's study that are most pertinent to her project:

[I]n any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved [. . .] Girard finds many examples in which the choice of the beloved is determined in the first place, not by the qualities of the beloved, but by the beloved's already being the choice of the person who has been chosen as a rival.⁷

Sedgwick's groundbreaking exploration of the homoerotic attachments obscured by Girard's designation "rival" is of undeniable value. However, in basing her search for attraction between men on Girard's model, the attachments she uncovers are inevitably

³ Garber traces "the timeliness and power of Sedgwick's intervention" through the take-up of her terminology in a wealth of recent title choices, including Emma Donoghue's *Passions Between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668-1801* and the Columbia University Press series on lesbian and gay topics, *Between Women*, *Between Men (Bisexuality)*, p573).

⁴ Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p162.

⁵ Rene Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976), p14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p12.

⁷ Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p21.

characterised by the violence of rivalry. The terms of Sedgwick's reading mean that desire between men is only uncovered in instances where a male character "is bound, through a woman whom he is incapable of loving, to a far more intense relation with a man toward whom he can express nothing but the most intimate violence."⁸ As noted in the introduction, this results in a homophobic logic (somewhat paradoxical given Sedgwick's concern with uncovering the institutions of homophobia) that in the absence of violence there is no desire. The prolonged investment in Girard's overarching theory of attraction in *Between Men* is inconsistent with the energetic recognition of the fluidity of desire elsewhere in the text, boldly signalled in the subtitle coinage "homosocial desire."

In a neo-Girardian approach to *Our Mutual Friend*, Sedgwick uncovers repeated patterns of three that she describes as "a chain of Girardian triangles."⁹ The triangles discovered are (in Sedgwick's order) Gaffer, Lizzie and Charley Hexam; Bradley Headstone, Lizzie and Charley Hexam; Eugene Wrayburn, Lizzie and Charley Hexam; and finally Eugene Wrayburn, Bradley Headstone and Lizzie Hexam. The striking detail about this list is that only the final trio can accurately be described as a Girardian structure. Only the relationship between Bradley and Eugene is represented as an erotic rivalry with the corresponding dynamic that their apparent 'attraction' to Lizzie is fuelled by an observation of the other male's ostensible desire for her. Girard's conception of the triangle is inextricable from his belief in imitative desire, indeed "triangular desire" and "mimetic desire" become interchangeable terms in his work.¹⁰ Neither this project nor Sedgwick's is concerned with uncovering the potentially incestuous erotic connections between the three members of the Hexam family; thus the dynamic of three out of four of her 'Girardian' triangles must be explained by something other than mimetic, contagious desire. Whilst Gaffer and Charley Hexam can be seen as rivals for Lizzie's affection and attention, Sedgwick does not argue that such rivalry is predicated on an initial incestuous desire of father or brother. Yet, Sedgwick's emphasis on the fact that both Bradley and Eugene have "an intense encounter with Charley before meeting Lizzie", carefully follows Girard's rigid chronology in which the beloved (Lizzie) has *already* been chosen by a rival (by

⁸ Ibid., p193.

⁹ Ibid., p165.

¹⁰ This interchangeability of terms is emphasised in Garber's commentary (p424).

implication Charley).¹¹ On meeting Lizzie, Bradley and Eugene transform their passionate responses to Charley by finding themselves “as if by compulsion, violently in love with her.”¹² In the unacknowledged replacement of the bonds of rivalry with those of siblinghood, Sedgwick unknowingly demonstrates that the family structure complicates patterns of desire in ways that Girard’s model cannot account for.

The (unrecognised) failure of the mimetic model to explain Bradley and Eugene’s avowed attraction to Lizzie as a relative (rather than the beloved) of Charley, creates a space for desire that is not represented within Girard’s totalising rivalry model. Dickens presents the sibling relationship between Charley and Lizzie as the key, indeed the *only* determinant in Bradley Headstone’s immediate ‘attraction’ to her. In the first reported conversation between Bradley and the pupil-teacher to whom “his attention had been attracted” (p215), Bradley uses the topic of Charley’s sister to facilitate physical proximity and a highly personal exchange about her (presumably sexual) propriety:

Mr Bradley Headstone, highly certified stipendiary schoolmaster, drew his right forefinger through one of the buttonholes of the boy’s coat, and looked at it attentively. ‘I hope your sister may be good company for you?’ (p217)

Bradley’s instantaneous desire for Lizzie occurs in the moment that “*he first set eyes on her*. It seemed to him as if all that he could suppress in himself had been suppressed, as if all that he could restrain in himself he had restrained, and the time had come – *in a rush, in a moment* – when the power of self-command had departed from him” (p336, emphasis added). The immediate unleashing of a previously restrained passion at the moment of first seeing Lizzie, is accompanied by an equally sudden practical impulse to marry her. Significantly this marital intent is described in mental rather than emotional terms, as “one fixed idea [. . .] an immoveable idea” (p336). On their return home after this first meeting, Bradley again uses Charley’s sister as the topic of confidential and personal conversation between them: “Some man who had worked his way might come to admire – your sister – and might even in time bring himself to think of marrying – your sister – ” (p231). The ironic mention of the time usually required before such contemplation signals the oddity of the inextricability of the love/marriage impulse in Bradley’s initial response to Lizzie. In this marital project the emphasis is focused less on the intended bride than on her brother,

¹¹ Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p165.

¹² Ibid.

who fervently supports the projected intermarriage as a mutually beneficial scheme for the men involved.

Both Bradley and Charley have a heavy emotional investment in their mutual scheme for becoming brothers-in-law. Charley urges Bradley to proceed, despite Bradley's awareness of Lizzie's probable objection to him: "What we have got to do, is, to succeed to-night, Mr Headstone, and all the rest follows" (p384). This collective language continues in Charley's label "our side", reinforcing the reciprocity of their involvement. They share a fantasy of mutual professional advancement and possible long-term cohabitation, presenting the match to Lizzie in distinctly similar terms. In his tortured marriage proposal, Bradley's concluding argument focuses on Charley:

Your brother favours me to the utmost, and it is likely that we might live and work together; anyhow, it is certain that he would have my best influence and support (p390).

As soon as she rejects this unpalatable suitor, Lizzie is subjected to further coercion from her brother. Charley again emphasises the professional benefits and hyperbolic emotional satisfaction that would be gained by the two men through intermarriage:

Then *I* come in. Mr Headstone has always got me on, and he has a good deal in his power, and of course if he was my brother-in-law he wouldn't get me on less, but would get me on more. Mr Headstone comes and confides in me, in a very delicate way, and says, 'I hope my marrying your sister would be agreeable to you, Hexam, and useful to you?' I say, 'There's nothing in the world, Mr Headstone, that I could be better pleased with' [. . .] Now, you see, Liz, on all three accounts – on Mr Headstone's, on mine, on yours – nothing could be better or more desirable (pp394-395).

In his description of the "three accounts", Charley lexically positions himself as the physical pivot around which Bradley and Lizzie's relationship can operate. This arrangement is emphasised through an identical physical organisation of the trio in the two descriptions that frame the proposal itself. Immediately prior to the graveyard scene in which Bradley makes his offer, the reader is told that "Bradley walked at his side – not at hers – and the brother and sister walked hand in hand" (p387). The same order occurs straight after this interview, when Lizzie is finally able to make Charley rejoin them: "She

darted to him, and caught him by the hand. Bradley followed, and laid his heavy hand on the boy's opposite shoulder" (p393). The inter-relationships are consistently represented as an incomplete triangle, in which Bradley and Lizzie are *only* bonded through the intermediate figure of Charley. The representation of Bradley's response to Lizzie as a vehicle through which he will strengthen his relationship with her brother, is suggestive of his prior "attract[ion]" to Charley that had necessarily remained "restrained" and "suppressed" until the fortuitous meeting with Charley's suitably marriageable sister.

Bradley's focus on Charley is further evinced through his inability to refer to Lizzie directly. In sharp contradistinction from Eugene Wrayburn's use of personal naming to woo (p399), Bradley *never* uses the name 'Lizzie' or even 'Miss Hexam'. Throughout the text he refers to her exclusively in terms of Charley, even describing Lizzie's first impact on him in these mediated terms: "the impression was fresh upon me of having seen his sister" (p339). The novel repeatedly dramatises the significance of this quirk. The reader is informed that the punctuation around Bradley's preferred term, "– your sister –" reflects his habit of making "a curious break both before and after the words" (p230). Jenny Wren draws further attention to the emotional priority implicit in the constant conceptualisation of Lizzie as "Hexam's sister": "There! Don't call her that. I can't bear you to call her that [. . .] for I don't like Hexam" (p337). Bradley's failure to alter his term demonstrates his unconquerable compulsion to place Charley first.

Sedgwick's investment in uncovering rivalrous structures allows her to subordinate the relationship between Bradley and Charley to that between Bradley and Eugene. Using the homophobic logic through which desire between men and violence become synonymous, Sedgwick identifies Bradley's antagonistic rivalry with Eugene as *the* crucial identification: "It soon emerges that this is, indeed, for him, the focus of the whole affair [. . .] After Lizzie has refused Bradley and left London, the desiring relation between Bradley and Eugene, far from dissipating, becomes hotter and more reciprocal."¹³ Without denying the representation of eroticism between Bradley and Eugene, this chapter insists upon the difference between this antagonistic relationship and Bradley's equally eroticised but more positive attachment to Charley. The fact that violence is not a consistent paradigm even

¹³ Ibid., p168.

within a single character's erotic responses to other men is strong evidence for a greater diversity of desire than Sedgwick acknowledges. In describing Bradley's relationship to Eugene, Sedgwick's temporal language – "it soon emerges", "after", "becomes" – gestures towards the importance of the novel's chronology in the emergence of this intensity of feeling. It is significant that Bradley's acknowledgement of rivalry, which is central to Sedgwick's argument, is only made *after* Lizzie's rejection: "He is much to me [. . .] He can be a rival to me among other things" (p392). This statement constitutes the pivotal moment at which Bradley's emphasis on Charley is shifted onto Eugene. The chronology of emotional transfer is reiterated in Charley's summary of these inter-relationships:

You fell in love with her, and I favoured you with all my might. She could not be induced to favour you, and so we came into collision with this Mr Eugene Wrayburn (p694).

The apparent triangle that emerges here between Bradley, Lizzie and Eugene is complicated by the fact that Bradley has never had a linear relation to Lizzie; his interest in her is inextricable from his attachment to Charley. Thus, in Bradley's perception of Eugene as the cause of Lizzie's rejection, Eugene is held responsible for thwarting the intermarriage that would cement the relationship between Bradley and Charley.

Bradley's violence towards Eugene expresses the same furious aggression that Charley directs at Lizzie for her destruction of the cherished in-lawing project. As Lizzie persists in her rejection of Bradley, Charley's anger becomes such in "his own mortified disappointment" that Lizzie has to defend herself physically as well as emotionally: "Charley, dear, that is the second time that you have almost struck me" (p395):

The boy's face clouded and darkened, as he said in a rough tone: 'What is the meaning of this? What have you done to my best friend? Out with the truth!'

'Charley!' said his sister. 'Speak a little more considerately!'

'I am not in the humour for consideration or for nonsense of any sort,' replied the boy. 'What have you been doing? Why has Mr Headstone *gone from us* in that way?' (p393, emphasis added)

Charley is aware that Lizzie's rejection will enforce a greater distance between himself and the schoolmaster. The shared male idyll of a brother-in-law-hood of co-working and prolonged cohabitation is shattered by Lizzie's refusal, regardless of whether that rejection

is primarily motivated by Lizzie's own antipathy to Bradley or by her attraction to Eugene. The overdetermined investment of Bradley and Charley in the marriage scheme is based on a shared understanding that such male intimacy can only be sanctioned in the long-term by the legal and social presence of an intermediate female body in the form of a wife.

Lizzie's rejection of Bradley results in the cessation of Bradley's professional relationship and emotional intimacy with her brother, signalled by Charley's long absence from the novel. The difference in circumstances from those of fantasised professional and physical proximity is emphasised when he is reintroduced near the end of the narrative for a final meeting with Bradley Headstone: "Charley Hexam was a master now, in another school, under another head" (p691). This final scene between Bradley and Charley has no other function than poignantly to dramatise Bradley's agony at Charley's self-protecting termination of their relationship:

The wretched creature seemed to suffer acutely under this renunciation.

A desolate air of utter and complete loneliness fell upon him, like a visible shade (p692).

Having "done with" Bradley, Charley cruelly elaborates his change of emotional allegiance, speculating on the possibility of his marrying the single schoolmistress at his new establishment. Significantly, this rejection is closely followed by the novel's most explicit depiction of Bradley's feelings for Charley:

Was it strange that the wretched man should take this heavily to heart?

Perhaps he had taken the boy to heart, first, through some long laborious years; perhaps through the same years he had found his drudgery lightened by communication with a brighter and more apprehensive spirit than his own; perhaps a family resemblance of face and voice between the boy and his sister, smote him hard in the gloom of his fallen state (p696).

The hinted physical inter-changeability of Charley and Lizzie further reveals the homoerotic dynamics of in-lawing. Bradley's marriage to Lizzie would not only enable his prolonged intimacy with her brother, it would also provide him with a socially accepted physical substitute for Charley's illicitly desired body.

In Bradley Headstone's formation of a family triangle with Charley and Lizzie Hexam all the crucial aspects of in-lawing in Dickens's work are rehearsed: the two men share

fantasies of prolonged and formalised attachment through intermarriage; the emotional motive is accompanied by schemes for professional and economic advancement; the damaging impact on the sister is dramatised; a rival for the sister disrupts the previous male relationship by preventing them from bonding through the family; and the initial physical attraction between men is articulated through the bodily inter-changeability of brother and sister. Such scenarios are repeatedly developed throughout the Dickens canon, with similarly homoerotic deployments of intermarriage appearing in over half of Dickens's novels.

In 1970 Harry Stone examined the inextricability of siblinghood from "the love pattern" in Dickens's work. Stone, however, attributes Dickens's tendency to "concentrate on the brother-sister rather than the lover" to Dickens's own ambivalent experiences of siblinghood.¹⁴ This thesis proposes an alternative to a rigidly biographical approach, without discounting the significance of Dickens's own family relationships. Dickens's personal experiences of sibling-in-law relationships are placed within a wider consideration of the significance of intermarriage in his society. This project takes up Stone's suggestion that the sibling/love patterns "assume their full significance only as they emerge in work after work."¹⁵ Through attention to the repeated recurrence of familial desire transference in Dickens's work, it is argued that Dickens creates a particular literary competence in his regular readers. The encounter of this motif in "work after work" allows the homoerotic nuances of each previous instance to accumulate, and become attached to each individual rendition.

Family Secrets: Uncovering the Historical Significance of In-Laws

Attention to the sibling relationship is crucial for a dismantling of Sedgwick's rivalrous Girardian model. In her failure to recognise the significance of the brother-sister bond, Sedgwick participates in a wider critical marginalisation of this aspect of Victorian fiction. Leonore Davidoff notes that in criticism, siblinghood has been "strangely neglected,

¹⁴ Harry Stone, 'The Love Pattern in Dickens's Novels', in *Dickens the Craftsman: Strategies of Presentation*, ed. by Robert Partlow (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1970), pp1-20, p8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p1.

relegated to a fragmentary footnote of the historical record.”¹⁶ Valerie Sanders agrees that “this is an oddly neglected area. The full significance of sibling relationships to English writers [. . .] has never been properly addressed and understood.”¹⁷ Sanders’s recent project addresses this conceptual gap by amassing a wealth of evidence to demonstrate the “intense emotional significance” of the brother-sister bond in the long nineteenth century.¹⁸ This chapter seeks to refigure the work performed by opposite-sex sibling relationships in Dickens’s fiction, through attention to the heavily repeated plot-motif exemplified in Bradley Headstone’s transference of desire from Charley to Lizzie Hexam. The recurrent longing for connectedness through intermarriage demonstrates the need for an examination of the significance of in-law bonding in Dickens’s society.

As a corollary to the critical failure to recognise the significance of siblinghood, affinal brother and sister relationships forged through marriage have been even more severely neglected, hitherto receiving no sustained critical attention. The otherwise highly comprehensive survey of family components recently undertaken in *The Family Story: Blood, Contract and Intimacy 1830-1860* only has one indexed entry for in-laws, and in this single reference the relationship is left as an enigma in a series of unanswered questions: “What, then, is our relation to our in-laws? What, if anything do we owe them? What do they owe us?”¹⁹ This speculative approach is entirely uncharacteristic of a text that excels in empirical analysis of the family. The previous lack of attention to sibling relationships has been attributed to an overdetermined critical concern with the vertical lines of filiation between parent and offspring rather than horizontal, collateral family lines:

Unlike spouses [. . .] siblings have no direct effect on reproduction – in a word, the sibling relationship is the structural basis for neither the formation of families nor their continuation.²⁰

However, if attention is focused on the range of motives for marriage, the significance of a potential spouse’s wider familial connections – particularly their sibling relationships –

¹⁶ Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p206.

¹⁷ Valerie Sanders, *The Brother-Sister Culture in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p2. Diane Chambers also observes the lack of critical attention to sibling bonds in literature, particularly the positions of the sister and sister-in-law [‘Triangular Desire and the Sororal Bond: The Deceased Wife’s Sister Bill’, *Mosaic*, 29.1 (1996), pp19-36, p19].

¹⁸ Sanders, *Brother-Sister Culture*, p2.

¹⁹ Davidoff et al, *The Family Story*, p80.

²⁰ Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p207.

insistently emerges. In this project a range of fictional and actual examples are uncovered in which siblinghood is *the* determining erotic and economic factor in marital choice, and thus a highly significant, direct determinant of family formation and continuation. This thesis, then, begins the wider project of addressing this historically significant, but almost ignored, familial experience.

Interfamilial marital alliances and marriages to the siblings of close friends were by no means unusual among Dickens's contemporaries. Victorians used the social circle of brothers and other relatives to provide a 'pool' of potential marriage partners for the girls of a family. Valerie Sanders notes that the potential for "other brother-sister combinations [to . . .] provide future spouses" was a factor in the development of friendships between families, and she documents that "sisters-in-law with an active and respectable social circle were also a means of introducing younger sisters to potential marriage partners":

Sibling living arrangements might offer [. . .] career advancement and marriage opportunities through introductions to brother's friends.²¹

Davidoff emphasises the importance of professional and economic factors in nineteenth-century intermarriage:

Brothers often went into partnership with the husbands of their sisters or the sister would subsequently marry a brother's partner [. . .] in a significant number of cases two brothers from one family would marry two sisters from another, or a brother and sister from one would marry a sister and brother from another.²²

Such alliances were not dependent on "religion, occupation or geographical area but were integral to the general combination of personal and economic linkages."²³ In an observation of a historical difference that explains the repugnance of a modern reader to Bradley and Charley's bald statements of mutual economic advantage, Davidoff traces the shift in attitudes throughout the twentieth century, until "what had been regarded as the

²¹ Sanders, *Brother-Sister Culture*, p25, pp27-28.

²² Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p214.

²³ Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p221.

desirable pooling of kinship skills and resources in the nineteenth century [became . . .] branded as psychologically and socially suspect nepotism.”²⁴

Dickens depicts various instances in which the primary motive for intermarriage is ostensibly financial, with a brother and future husband exploiting what Gayle Rubin has called “the traffic in women” for their own monetary advantage:

If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of the relationship rather than a partner to it.²⁵

Examples of this pattern emerge most strongly in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and in *Great Expectations*. In the earlier novel Fred Trent designs to access his sister’s inheritance by “persuad[ing], or if the word sounds more feasible, forc[ing] Nell to a secret marriage” with his best friend Dick Swiveller:

That you become the *sole inheritor* of the *wealth* of this *rich old hunk*s, that you and I *spend* it together, and that you get into the *bargain* a beautiful young wife (p64, emphasis added).

Although Fred’s persuasions focus on monetary gain, the narrator intervenes with the mysterious information that his “motives [. . .] were something deeper than any which Richard Swiveller entertained or understood, but these being left to their own development, require no present elucidation” (p65). The novel, however, refuses to fulfil this promise of future clarification, only specifying Fred’s financial aims. Given that the potential for mutual monetary gain is openly shared with Dick, this incomplete gesture towards other unspecifiable reasons deprivileges the surface, avaricious motive in favour of the private and unspeakable. This shift from the financial to the unspecifiable is closely paralleled in Arthur Havisham and Compeyson’s conspiracy to defraud Arthur’s half-sister, Miss Havisham, through an identical marital scheme in *Great Expectations*. Pip’s surprise that the schemers leave their plan incomplete – “I wonder he didn’t marry her and get all the property” – pointedly questions the failure of the avaricious ‘explanation’ (p180). Herbert is forced to speculate about other factors that could account for this otherwise strangely under-motivated half-scam:

²⁴ Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p216.

²⁵ Gayle Rubin, ‘Notes on the “Political Economy” of Sex’, in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. by Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp157-210, p174.

He *may have* been married already, and her cruel mortification *may have* been a part of her half-brother's scheme [. . .] Mind! I don't know that (p180, emphasis added).

Herbert's closing warning about the probable insufficiency of his explanations again gestures towards an unnameable motive that is elided and silenced, but still not completely stifled by the monetary rationalisation.²⁶

Dickens devalues the sufficiency of the monetary motive as an explanation for in-lawing in the most ostensibly financially driven cases. More often, the practical and economic aspects that were so central to intermarriage in the period are presented as part of a wider range of factors that motivate the potential brothers-in-law. For example, Bradley Headstone and Charley Hexam's professional interest emerges as just one facet of their complex investment in an intermarriage which also offers emotional and homoerotic advantages. Previous anthropological insistence on the significance of economic aspects of in-lawing should not be allowed to elide the diverse practical and emotional benefits documented in many first-hand descriptions of in-law relationships in this period.

Davidoff and Hall temper their focus on economic aspects of intermarriage by acknowledging the importance of prior intimacy with the other family members of a future spouse:

Intermarriage also sealed relationships of friendship. Rebecca Solly, a Unitarian from Essex, deeply desired that her best friend would become her 'sister', which she eventually did by marrying one of Rebecca's elder brothers. Men too, prized friendship which they confirmed by marriage. George Gardner married the sister of his childhood playmate and adult friend, James Soanes, despite her malformed spine.²⁷

Not all experiences of in-lawing were as unproblematic as this brief example suggests; Emily Dickinson, as the previous chapter has documented, experienced extreme difficulty

²⁶ Although the convincingness of the financial explanation for in-lawing is repeatedly destabilised, Dickens still does not present any of the avowedly avaricious attempts as successful. Dickens's most thorough denouncement of such an employment of women as objects of exchange is presented through the sensitive depiction of Miss Havisham's trauma at the total disregard of her emotions in this male collusion for profit. Although figured as such by male schemers, the women involved never actually become "a conduit of the[ir] relationship."

²⁷ Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p221.

in reconciling her desire to formalise her relationship to Sue Gilbert by becoming ‘sisters’ (in-law), with her trauma at the inevitable sharing of this intimate friend that marriage would demand. However, compared to the agonised responses of those women who anticipated a geographical, economic and emotional separation from their closest friend after marriage, marrying into that friend’s family provided a desirable means of maintaining control over this central relationship and protecting its continuity. Such motives certainly informed Ellen Nussey’s instigation of her brother’s proposal to her particular friend Charlotte Bronte.²⁸ Although Bronte rejected Henry Nussey’s suit on the grounds of incompatibility of temperament, her letter to Ellen demonstrates her reluctance to relinquish the benefits of in-lawing:

Now my dear Ellen there were in this proposal some things that might have proved a strong temptation – I thought if I were to marry so, Ellen could live with me and how happy I should be.²⁹

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg records that even non-cohabiting sisters-in-law experienced similar benefits of prolonged proximity:

Women frequently spent their days within the social confines of such extended families [. . .] Sisters-in-law visited one another and, in some families, seemed to spend more time with one another than with their husbands.³⁰

Private testimonies indicate the practical, emotional and erotic advantages of in-lawing for both women and men. Dickens occasionally uses (potential) sister-in-law relationships to articulate female homoeroticism, most explicitly in the relationship between Rosa and the Landless twins in *Edwin Drood*, which is discussed later as a particularly developed instance of body doubling. A less fully elaborated example of women’s homoerotic investment in in-lawing is offered in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Miss Pross considers her brother to be the only suitable husband for her emotionally and physically treasured mistress, Lucy. Pross suffers from a jealous “fit of the jerks” whenever her beloved mistress is visited by other suitors (p104, p106). On these, “not unfrequent” [sic.] occasions, the devoted servant is “suddenly [. . .] afflicted with a twitching in the head and

²⁸ Rebecca Fraser, *Charlotte Bronte* (London: Methuen, 1988), p119.

²⁹ *The Letters of Charlotte Bronte*, ed. by Margaret Smith, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), I, 12 March 1839, p187.

³⁰ Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, p62.

body” (p104). Miss Pross, rather like Susan Nipper in *Dombey and Son*, is only able to accept her adored mistress’s impending marriage “through a gradual process of reconciliation to the inevitable” (p199). Lucy’s wedding ends Miss Pross’s hopes of their becoming united through intermarriage, and Pross’s enjoyment of the day is impaired by “the yet lingering consideration that her brother Solomon should have been the bridegroom” (p199).

Catherine Waters has observed Louisa Chick’s (nee Dombey) similarly powerful investment in sister-in-law selection, pointing to the domestic empowerment that such an alliance could engender:

The most expedient course available to Louisa after Fanny’s death is to furnish her brother with a wife of her own choosing, and as her most faithful acolyte, and one who is unlikely to produce children of her own, Miss Tox is the best candidate.³¹

Waters points out that Dombey’s own, alternative selection forces his sister “to abandon this ‘tack’ and to squash the *romantic expectations she has awakened* in the breast of Miss Tox.”³² Although Mrs Chick hastily abandons her “very particular friend” (p17) as soon as her in-lawing plan is foiled, Waters’s phrasing reflects the intimacy that develops between these women as Mrs Chick makes herself solely responsible for the wooing of her prospective sister-in-law.

Whilst displaying an appreciation of the potential empowerments, homoerotic and otherwise, of sister-in-law relationships, Dickens’s fiction focuses more insistently on erotic uses of in-lawing between men. This bias is perhaps informed by the gendering of contemporary representations of desire transference. There are fewer examples of female in-lawing in the period, although Balzac’s short story ‘The Girl with the Golden Eyes’ (1815) features an exceptionally explicit transfer of female desire from sister to brother. The heroine, Paquita, enjoys her first sexual experience with the almost identical sister – they could not have “been more alike” – of the man she is later to lose her ‘virginity’ to. Speculating on Paquita’s fidelity, brother and sister conclude that in being “true to the

³¹ Catherine Waters, ‘Ambiguous Intimacy: Brother and Sister Relationships in *Dombey and Son*’, *Dickensian*, 84.1 (1988), pp9-26, p12.

³² *Ibid.*, p13, emphasis added.

blood” in her choice of partners, she “was as little guilty as it is possible to be.”³³ In a rather more subtle register Jane Austen’s fiction provides some isolated models of female sibling desire transference, although it is less likely that Dickens was familiar with these.³⁴ In a review piece reflecting on the possible homoerotic dynamic of Austen’s relationship with her elder sister Cassandra, Terry Castle briefly observed that “it is a curious yet arresting phenomenon in the novels that so many of the final happy marriages seem designed not so much to bring about a union between hero and heroine as between the heroine and the hero’s sister.”³⁵ Castle proposed *Northanger Abbey* (1818) as her example, citing Catherine Morland’s response to her engagement to Henry Tilney: “The most intensive part of her joy seems to derive from the fact that in doing so she also becomes ‘sister’ to his sister Eleanor, whose subtle approbation she has sought and glowingly received – throughout the novel.”³⁶ Castle offers this rare critical observation of the erotics of in-lawing as an aside, returning in the next column to consanguinal rather than affinal sister relations. Castle was lambasted in the letters pages of the *LRB* for failing sufficiently to support her sibling-in-law argument. However, as one response to another reader’s very plausible application of Castle’s argument to *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) suggests, the widespread rejection of her theory was directly linked to a refusal to acknowledge the possibility of homoerotic plotting by such a culturally revered figure as Austen: “I am entranced by the notion of a sister/brother/sister-in-law ménage à trois with Elizabeth [Darcy, nee Bennet] at the apex of its triangle, swinging [. . .] both ways – but I am damned if I believe it.”³⁷ Whilst a wider conception of homoerotic sister-in-lawhood was available for Dickens to draw upon and expand, he was exposed to particularly influential instances

³³ Honore de Balzac, *The Girl With the Golden Eyes*, anonymous trans. (London: Sphere, 1970), p125.

³⁴ Whilst Dickens “particularly admired” Balzac and read him in French (Collins, p142), he had less time for Austen’s writing. None of Austen’s works were held in the Gad’s Hill library and Collins documents that “Dickens had not read her at all in 1839 and never did much enjoy her” (p140).

³⁵ Terry Castle, ‘Sister-Sister’, *London Review of Books*, 3 August 1995, pp3-6, p3.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ J. Wolley, letter responding to ‘Sister-Sister’, *London Review of Books*, 14 December 1995, p4. See the introduction for further background to this controversy. Glenda Hudson’s alternative reading of the creation of families of choice in Austen’s novels also privileges the sororal and fraternal. Hudson suggests that quasi- or foster-sibling ties repeatedly constitute the major determinant in selection of marital partner: “Austen will not allow her heroes and heroines to marry on the ground of sexual magnetism or romantic love. She constructs marriages on the foundation of sibling ties” [*Sibling Love and Incest in Jane Austen’s Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p59]. Also see Hudson’s chapter, ‘Consolidated Communities: Masculine and Feminine Values in Jane Austen’s Fiction’ in *Jane Austen and the Discourses of Feminism*, ed. by Devoney Looser (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), pp101-114, in which she emphasises Austen’s egalitarian use of the “conventions of likeness and symmetry” between siblings (p107).

of male in-lawing in the biography and work of his favourite poet, Alfred Tennyson, and in the fiction of one of his most loved living novelists, Edward Bulwer Lytton.

“He Loved a Daughter of Our House”: Contemporary Models of Desire Transference

Peter Levi’s biography of Tennyson emphasises the frequency with which close male friends married one another’s sisters:

Four members of the Apostles at least planned at one time or another to marry Tennyson sisters. But it is also true that Charles and Alfred married sisters, and so did Arthur and Horatio Tennyson. The reason is partly a tendency to cuddle up, and to want what one’s brother or close friend has got. The tendency is rarer today, when families are not so big or so close, and social opportunity has enormously increased. Even in my lifetime it was considered a boy’s duty to produce possible suitors for his sisters: or rather it was a past duty still spoken of, the shadow of a disappearing reality.³⁸

The lives of the so-called ‘Apostles’ (members of the ‘Conversazione Society’, which was formed at Cambridge in 1820) offer a variety of examples of the use of in-law bonds to promote male relationships. As Peter Allen argues, “they not only taught one another: they married into one another’s families and prompted one another’s careers.”³⁹ In Allen’s account of the group, the creation of in-law relationships emerges as the Apostles’ effort to “prolong the special relationship[s] they had enjoyed with one another”:

³⁸ Peter Levi, *Tennyson* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), p58. Further examples are apparent in the life of Samuel Coleridge (1772-1834). Coleridge repeatedly attempted to cement bonds with a close male friend by forming a brother-in-law relationship. Having married Sara Fricker, Southey’s fiancée’s sister, he fell in love with Sara Hutchinson, Wordsworth’s fiancée’s sister. Steven Weissman offers detailed exploration of these incidents, and two other instances of this pattern in Coleridge’s experience. Although Weissman perceives this recurrent impulse as Coleridge’s “brother complex”, through which the poet sought to replace his lost brother Frank, Weissman’s consideration of the eroticism of the attachment between Coleridge and Wordsworth suggests the motive of desire transference [*His Brother’s Keeper: A Psychobiography of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Connecticut: International Universities Press, 1989), pxiv]. A much later example emerges in the experience of Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), who only weeks after the death of his intimate friend Walcott Balestier, married Walcott’s sister Carrie. Andrew Lycett’s recent biography suggests that Kipling’s family were anxious about his tendency to transfer desire for both unobtainable men and women, onto their respective sisters: “Alice feared that her son, in his naiveté, was repeating his mistake with the Taylor sister and was attaching himself to this new Carrie *because* of his friendship with her brother Walcott” [*Rudyard Kipling* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1999), p231]. Lycett also sees familial transference in Kipling’s initial liking for the married Ted Taylor, and subsequent attraction to Caroline Taylor: “he was clearly wooing one sister so as to stay close to the other” (pp177-178).

³⁹ Peter Allen, *The Cambridge Apostles: The Early Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978), pvii.

Such families as the Stephens, the Darwins, the Stracheys, the Trevelyans were connected by a complex network of intermarriage and interrelations of many kinds, and newcomers to this social class tended to form similar links with its established members.⁴⁰

Whilst there were multiple social and emotional motives for formalising and prolonging these relationships, Richard Dellamora's work on the "complex realities of male friendship" between the Apostles, suggests a homoerotic impetus. Dellamora argues that the "love and sexuality among members of the Apostles at Cambridge and afterwards" provided a direct source of sexual knowledge for Alfred Tennyson and Arthur Hallam, who were both members of the society in the early 1830s:

Tennyson's circle at Cambridge fostered intimacy in ways that might have led to sexual experimentation, even to sexual involvement between members of the same sex.⁴¹

Herbert Sussman gives a similarly homoerotically suggestive account of the interrelationships and efforts at intermarriage between members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in the mid nineteenth century:

[T]he Brotherhood solidified its homosocial ties through trade in the bodies of women. In a fashion strikingly similar to the relation of Tennyson to Hallam, [Dante Gabriel] Rossetti offered James Collinson his sister in marriage in order to strengthen the masculine ties of the band.⁴²

A particular closeness existed between the two men; Dante Gabriel had championed Collinson's admission into the PRB, despite resistance from Millais and Holman Hunt.⁴³

Another Rossetti brother, William Michael, records their effort to make their brotherhood more than imaginary, echoing the familiar language of compulsion:

James Collinson, about the time of the formation of the PRB [in early 1848], was introduced to Christina, then aged seventeen, in our family circle, and he immediately fell in love with her [. . .] He explained his feeling to Dante Gabriel, who, with perhaps too headlong a wish to serve the interests of

⁴⁰ Ibid., p6, p199.

⁴¹ Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill and London: U of North Carolina P, 1990), p19. For further details on the relationships with both men and women enjoyed by Tennyson's friends and Apostolic fellows see pp20-24.

⁴² Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities*, p142.

⁴³ William Michael Rossetti, *Some Reminiscences*, 2 vols (London: 1906), I, p66.

a 'Pre-Raphaelite Brother', represented the matter to Christina and advocated Collinson's cause.⁴⁴

The "strikingly similar" intended marital triangle of Alfred Tennyson and his closest friend, Arthur Hallam, who was affianced to Tennyson's favourite sister Emily, is perhaps the best known actual example of such a triadic relationship. In April 1830, a year after meeting Hallam at Cambridge University, Tennyson invited his best friend to the family home. Christopher Ricks cites Hallam's tellingly constructed report of a later visit to the house: "I am now at Somersby, not only as the friend of Alfred Tennyson, but as the lover of his sister."⁴⁵ The relationship has provoked a wealth of reflections on the motives for Hallam's engagement, and there is a consensus that this "was how his affection for Alfred resolved itself."⁴⁶ Critics concur that the planned marriage was determined by male bonds. Robert Martin argues that Hallam's "deep affection for Alfred had predisposed him to choose one of the daughters of the Rectory [. . .] thus knitting still more tightly the bond of their friendship", whilst Garrett Jones suggests that "Arthur actually needed this double bonding in order to anchor his emotions more firmly in their own [male] relationship."⁴⁷ Alfred's favouritism towards Emily displays what Davidoff has called "elective affinity", the expression of individuality in the restricted family setting (as parents could not be chosen) by showing preference for a sibling.⁴⁸ Hallam's corresponding election of Alfred's own favourite over other "daughters of the Rectory" (including the renowned beauty Mary, who was the favourite sister of Charles Tennyson), further demonstrates the centrality of the male relationship to this proposed marriage.

The primacy of their commitment to one another as the basis of the intended intermarriage is repeatedly expressed in Tennyson's and Hallam's representations of the situation in their correspondence and work. *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (1850), Tennyson's fragmented elegy for Hallam, offers invaluable insight into the importance of male in-lawing for Dickens's

⁴⁴ Ibid. p71. Christina originally rejected the suit on religious grounds, when Collinson had apparently abandoned Catholicism he proposed again and was accepted. Christina terminated the engagement when Collinson was unable to permanently alter his religion (ibid., pp71-74).

⁴⁵ Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p34.

⁴⁶ Levi, p58.

⁴⁷ Robert Martin, *Tennyson: The Unquiet Heart* (Oxford: Faber, 1980) p103; Garrett Jones, *Alfred and Arthur: An Historic Friendship* (Hertford: Authors Online, 2001), p44.

⁴⁸ Davidoff, 'Worlds Between', p215

contemporaries. In the epilogue to his actual brother-in-law, Edward Lushington, Tennyson expresses his absolute delight at the prospect of forming such a bond with Hallam:

Nor have I felt so much of bliss
Since first he told me that he loved
A daughter of our house.⁴⁹

Poem eighty-four offers a fantasy vision of the benefits of this relationship, had Hallam lived to marry Emily. Tennyson envisages a permanent domestic attachment and the continued intellectual stimulus of a life that would be officially “link’d with thine in love and fate” (84, line 38, p50):

I see myself an honor’d guest,
Thy partner in the flowery walk
Of letters, genial table-talk,
Or deep dispute, and graceful jest (84, lines 21-24, p50).

Tennyson pictures many such emotional benefits, including the privilege of becoming uncle to Hallam’s sons, traditionally a particularly significant and intimate alliance. In an explicit acknowledgement of the physicality enabled by the creation of family ties Tennyson describes Hallam as “A central warmth diffusing bliss/ In glance and smile, and clasp and kiss,/ On all the branches of thy blood” (84, lines 6-8, p49). Such familial embraces can now include Tennyson, as he insists that through intermarriage their blood lines are commingled: “Thy blood, my friend, and partly mine” (84, line 9, p49). This emphasis on shared blood suggests the conceptual validity for desiring males of becoming one blood through the in-law bond.

As well as having a religious basis, the popular sense of blood brother(in-law)hood is legally enshrined. Sybil Wolfram’s study regarding changing British legislation of in-law relationships clarifies that legally “consanguinity and affinity were on precisely the same footing with regard not only to the voidability of marriage but also to incest.”⁵⁰ This identical legal treatment of links through marriage and links through blood meant that in effect brothers-in-law became the same flesh. Furthermore, the term ‘affinity’ which denotes in-law relationships, also has the parallel application of “affinity by inclination or

⁴⁹ Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (New York and London: Norton, 1973), Epilogue, lines 6-8, p86.

⁵⁰ Sybil Wolfram, *Inlaws and Outlaws: Kinship and Marriage in England* (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1987), p29. For a detailed exploration of the many overlaps in legal treatment of consanguinal and affinal relations see chapters one and two, esp. pp16-20.

attraction”; the OED records the concurrent usage of these terms from 1494. Through this dual definition, relationships formed through marriage had connotations of the “voluntary social relationship; companionship, alliance, association” denoted by the second sense of ‘affinity’. Thus Tennyson’s vision of brother-in-law-hood as reaffirming close emotional bonds cohered with the representation of this relationship in the laws and language of the time.⁵¹

Hallam’s presentations of the triangle also contribute to a modern understanding of the significance of the in-law bond in the nineteenth century. Ricks notes that “Hallam’s sonnets to Emily in April and May 1830 show that he immediately loved her.”⁵² This sudden infatuation is closely paralleled in William Michael Rossetti’s reminiscence of Collinson’s “immediate” love for the sister of his favourite PRB, and in Dickens’s representation of Bradley Headstone’s compulsive, instantaneous love for his best friend’s sister. Just as Bradley’s meeting with Lizzie enables a release of all that has previously been “suppressed” and “restrained” (p336), Hallam’s sonnets to Emily express a permissible conversion of previously unspeakable feeling:

Open the chamber where affection’s voice,

For rare occasions is kept close and fine:

Bid it but say, ‘Sweet Emily, be mine’

[. . .] change thou for words thy sighs.⁵³

The repeated references to his previous repression of affection in the literal closet of a “close” locked “chamber” suggest more than the usual coyness of a new lover. Like Lizzie

⁵¹ Emily Tennyson’s relationship with Arthur Hallam’s sister, Ellen, after his death, provides an important and poignant example of the similar emotional benefits of sibling substitution for women. Until Ellen’s untimely death in 1837, Emily found great consolation in imagining slippage between brother and sister, describing this in an 1835 letter:

In listening to thee imagination has often left me to suppose ‘twas the voice of my beloved Arthur, thy sentiments and manner are so like his, that I loved when sitting by thy side to close my eyes, and lose myself in this delicious dream – Dear, dear Ellen, how could I part from thee? – how could I find strength of mind sufficient to tear myself from thy embrace, and look my last on those eyes of tender light! (Quoted by Jones, p106).

Given the corresponding intensity and inherent eroticism of this relationship, Jones suggests that it offers a “mirror to the friendship between their two brothers, although in this case, Ellen became for Emily a surrogate Arthur” (ibid.).

⁵² Ricks, p34.

⁵³ Arthur Hallam, ‘Why throbbeest thou, my heart, why thickly breathest?’, undated sonnet, attributed to the first half of 1830, in T. H. Vail Motter, (ed.), *The Writings of Arthur Hallam* (London: Oxford UP, 1943), p88. The poems considered here were published by Hallam’s father in 1834 and circulated privately. Although in this first edition much of Hallam’s poetical writing was suppressed the 1830 sonnets were included.

Hexam, Emily is presented as the embodiment of those “rare occasions” on which feeling can acceptably be revealed, and sighs translated into words.

Hallam’s compulsive love for Emily was evidently primarily predicated on his intense existing bond with her brother. However, his decision to marry her was also based on a reciprocated wider affection for the Tennysons as a family. Martin suggests that Hallam experienced the endearing informality, warmth and impetuosity of the “Tennysons *en masse*” as a welcome contrast to the sterner atmosphere of his own home: “Hallam seems to have fallen in love at once, but with the whole family rather than a particular member.”⁵⁴ His regard was affectionately returned. Tennyson’s young sister Matilda, who was thirteen when Hallam first visited, said of the whole family later: “we were all in love with him from the first.”⁵⁵ Dickens’s own relationship with the Hogarth family fulfilled a similar search for support and affection that were not provided by his existing relatives. Kaplan’s biography documents that Dickens “wanted a family he could identify with, who would provide the intimacy and stability that his own lacked.”⁵⁶ As Kaplan suggests, Dickens’s offer of marriage to Catherine Hogarth was largely determined by his longing to be part of that family “who welcomed him warmly and whose warmth he returned.”⁵⁷ Dickens’s own experience of marriage into a “family of choice” provided him with a personal appreciation of the importance of other family members in the selection of a marital partner.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Martin, p100.

⁵⁵ Quoted by Jones, p42.

⁵⁶ Kaplan, *Dickens*, p67.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p66. In later years Dickens was to respond less warmly to the in-lawing advances of some of his closest male friends. Both other members of what Dickens called his “triumvirate” of Italian travellers made efforts to link their own family to Dickens’s through marriage. Before their 1853-4 tour, Augustus Egg had proposed to Dickens’s sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth, “but to Dickens’s great relief the mainstay of his household turned Egg down, though they remained good friends” [Catherine Peters, *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins* (London: Minerva, 1991), p132]. Third traveller, and intimate friend Wilkie Collins did become related to Dickens, when Charles Collins (Wilkie’s younger brother) married Dickens’s daughter Kate. Dickens was against the match, which proved to be an unhappy one. See Ackroyd, *Dickens*, for further details of Charles’s possible homosexuality, alleged impotence and “mysterious wasting illness” (p875).

⁵⁸ The apt term ‘families of choice’ was employed by Barbara Caine in a paper given at ‘The Politics of Friendship Conference’, London, June 2003, to refer to the determination to marry into a selected family through *any* of its marriageable members. Caine focused on Ray Strachey who became determined to “connect herself to the family”, after falling in love with Pippa Strachey in the early twentieth century. This example demonstrates the historical homoerotic impetus for joining a ‘family of choice’, a motive which is made explicit in the current use of this phrase to describe the formation of families by gay and lesbian parents. On current queer re-definitions of kinship see especially Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy and Catherine Donovan, *Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments* (London and New York: Yale UP, 2001) and Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York and Oxford: Columbia UP, 1991).

Dickens lived within a culture that readily accepted the potential for desire transference from one sibling to another. From 1835 the question of whether it was legal for a widower to marry his deceased wife's sister was hotly contested. Diane Chambers argues convincingly for the wider cultural significance of these debates, which were "fought on the political scene almost annually for most of the Victorian period." As Chambers suggests, the whole of this controversy "was about the potential for triangular desire."⁵⁹ The debates rehearsed contemporary attitudes about sibling sameness; perceptions of familial similarity were intensified in the case of two sisters, whose "physical and social sameness made their difference even harder to detect."⁶⁰ Jane Waller's thorough examination of fictional responses to the 'deceased wife's sister' controversy concludes that given the cultural investment in the paradigm of sororal similarity, "the idea that the man would be attracted to both sisters seems almost taken for granted."⁶¹ The prominence of such a possibility in the public consciousness had direct implications for Dickens in his later career. A belief that desire could readily be transferred from one sister to another probably contributed to the accusations of sister-in-law incest that were circulated about Dickens, after his separation from Catherine.⁶² Dickens forcefully repudiated these physical allegations. However, from his intense relationships with Catherine's sisters, Dickens would have been acutely aware that emotional attachments to siblings-in-law could be more heartfelt than marital bonds. Michael Slater speculates about the particular appeal of the Hogarth siblings in Dickens's attraction to this family unit:

The actual sister-sister relationship always seems to have charmed him (if Catherine Hogarth had been sisterless would that have diminished her attractiveness in his eyes, one wonders?).⁶³

The much contested erotic nuances of Dickens's relationships with Mary and Georgina Hogarth are less important here than the personal appreciation of affinal attachments that Dickens acquired through his wider relations with his wife's family.

As well as emerging from a broader cultural preoccupation with desire transference, Dickens's work was informed by contemporary literary and actual examples of in-lawing.

⁵⁹ Chambers, pp19-20.

⁶⁰ Jane Waller, *Two Sisters Loving One Man: the Victorians and the Sisterly Ideal* (unpublished MA dissertation, Birkbeck College, University of London, 2003), p4.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² For an account of these allegations, see Kaplan, *Dickens*, pp389-394.

⁶³ Michael Slater, *Dickens and Women*, p367.

Edward Bulwer Lytton's 1828 novel *Pelham* offers a highly homoerotic rendering of male in-law bonds. The novelist was one of Dickens's most admired contemporaries and the two authors became firm friends, co-founding the 'Guild of Literature and Art'.⁶⁴ Dickens named one of his sons Edward Bulwer Lytton (a sure index to his literary admirations – an older son was named Alfred Tennyson) and devoted considerable shelf space to the author at Gad's Hill, stocking poetry, short fiction and a twenty volume edition of Bulwer Lytton's novels, including *Pelham*.⁶⁵ In this novel the eponymous hero imperfectly transfers his excessive enthusiasm for Reginald Glanville – "I thought as I looked at him, that I had never seen so perfect a specimen of masculine beauty, at once so physical and intellectual" – onto Reginald's sister, Ellen. Having been introduced to her, Pelham describes himself (giving the familiar, telling precedence to his response to the male sibling) as "full of hope, energy, ambition – of interest for Reginald Glanville – of adoration for his sister."⁶⁶ Fearing that Reginald has committed murder Pelham proposes to Ellen to ensure her "a protector", and then immediately offers to abandon her in favour of a furtive overseas life with his prospective brother-in-law:

I told him all that had just occurred between Ellen and myself. 'And now', said I, as I clasped his hand, 'I have a proposal to make, to which you must accede: let me accompany you abroad: I will go with you to whatever corner of the world you may select. We will plan together every possible method of concealing our retreat [. . .] I will tend upon you, watch over you, bear with you, with more than the love and tenderness of a brother.'

Offering also to make sporadic visits to England to ensure Ellen's 'protection', Pelham then neatly rationalises her out of the arrangement, assuring Reginald that the male duo can still be maintained: "I will then return to you alone, that your seclusion may not be endangered by the knowledge, even, of Ellen, and you shall have me by your side till – till –"⁶⁷ This scheme neatly exposes the marriage as a device to allow the brothers-in-law an increased intimacy. Dickens's association of this scene with same-sex desire is suggested in his reworking of Pelham's offer of "more than the love and tenderness of a brother" in Mortimer's poignant declaration at Eugene's bedside: "we have long been much more than

⁶⁴ *Companion*, pp63-64.

⁶⁵ Collins, p140 and *Stonehouse*.

⁶⁶ Edward Bulwer Lytton, *Pelham, or Adventures of a Gentleman* (London: Routledge, 1848), p119, p193.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p257.

brothers.”⁶⁸ Ironically, given Bulwer Lytton’s anxiety that Dickens should make his fiction fulfil conventional romantic expectations, this novel may have provided a template for Dickens’s development of a wide range of alternative familial scenarios that operate through the homoerotic device of in-lawing.⁶⁹

The 1850 publication of *In Memoriam A.H.H.* by Dickens’s most admired poet provides particular insight into the complex motivations that made brother-in-law-hood so desirable. As Matthew Sweet has demonstrated, the homoerotic dynamic of this elegy was emphasised in many later nineteenth-century writings on homosexuality. The hero of an 1878 erotic novel ‘The Monomaniac of Love’ “keeps his hair in ‘the style’ displayed in the photographs of Mr Tennyson”, and is described as being “a regular Mary-Ann” for his preference for Tennysonian coiffure.⁷⁰ In 1908 Xavier Mayne identified *In Memoriam A.H.H.* as “a homosexual threnody”, describing the poem as “exhaling elegiacly so much psychological Uranism” and as “a panegyric of the Uranian psychological bond between two idealistic young men.”⁷¹ Whilst it is impossible to ascertain how far Dickens interpreted *In Memoriam* as homoerotic confession, his attentive re-reading of the poem certainly provided him with an explicit confirmation of the advantages of intermarriage for men in love with another male.⁷²

Tennyson and Hallam’s poetical representations of their mediated relationship have ensured the posterity of what has become the best known example of a nineteenth-century family triangle. As such, biographical approaches to Tennyson constitute the main existing site where folk-wisdom and personal approaches to ‘in-lawing’ emerge, and where its homoerotic potential is anxiously contested. Michael Thorn’s *Tennyson* offers suggestive

⁶⁸ For an exploration of the homoerotics of this bed-scene at the close of *Our Mutual Friend* see the previous chapter.

⁶⁹ See chapter two for discussion of Bulwer Lytton’s suggestion that Dickens provide a more romantic end to *Great Expectations*.

⁷⁰ Quoted by Matthew Sweet, *Inventing the Victorians*, p201.

⁷¹ Mayne, p364. Sweet also comments on Mayne’s homoerotic interpretation of the poem, p202. Robb records a similar homoerotic interpretation by Magnus Hirshfield who included the poem in his 1900 bibliography for “sexual intermediates” (*Strangers*, p225).

⁷² “Tennyson’s 1842 *Poems* became ‘very favourite reading with him’; in 1844 he was still reading them again and again, and exclaiming ‘What a great creature he is’ [and later] ‘Lord what a blessed thing it is to find a man who can write’” (Collins, *Dickens’s Reading*, p140). In ‘Dickens, Tennyson and the Past’, *Dickensian*, 75 (1979), pp131-142, Robin Gilmour reinforces this, noting that Tennyson “was the one poet after Shakespeare [. . . that Dickens] read and re-read most carefully in adult life” (p131).

but unsubstantiated musing on the social and emotional impulses that fuelled such relationships:

A special thrill can attach itself to being introduced to the sisters of one's best friend. They have been spoken about and imagined. They possess intimate knowledge of he who is the cause of the introduction [. . .] And if, in addition, they are beautiful and of suitable age, *it is almost inevitable* that the friend, the visitor, will fall in love [emphasis added].⁷³

Presumably, Thorn is relying on personal experience of a similar kind to that employed in Levi's speculation that such relationships are motivated by a "tendency to cuddle up, and to want what one's brother or close friend has got."⁷⁴ Thorn's language of inevitability is again notably close to that used in Sedgwick's exploration of the rendering safe of powerful bonds between men by the immediate transfer of feeling "as if by compulsion" from a male rival onto a shared female 'love' object.⁷⁵ Here – as in Sedgwick's examples of Lizzie and Charley Hexam and in Hallam's own presentation of Emily as a vehicle for the immediate relief of his repressed feeling for her brother – it clearly emerges that a particular family structure of opposite-sex siblings can enable a similar, compulsive transfer. Homoerotic connotations are deeply embedded in Thorn's ambiguous language of "a special thrill", and the unspecified appeal of a sister's "intimate knowledge." Thorn quickly becomes alarmed by the implications of what he had offered as a common-sense interpretation of the motives of in-lawing. Lest the reader is persuaded into an appreciation of an erotic dimension to the relationship between Tennyson and Hallam, Thorn spends the following pages disavowing those homoerotic possibilities that his own connotative language had raised. He eventually settles for what he (wrongly) believes to be a safe, asexual model of "platonic possessiveness."⁷⁶ It is significant that despite Thorn's antipathy to homosexual or homoerotic interpretations of this relationship, he is unable to expunge the nuances of same-sex desire from his description of the familial triangle.

Michael Wollf generated considerable controversy on the VICTORIA research web when in May 1997 he suggested that Hallam's triangular relationship with Emily and Alfred Tennyson could illuminate a wider cultural practice of erotic male bonding:

⁷³ Michael Thorn, *Tennyson* (London: Little, Brown and Co., 1992), p59.

⁷⁴ Levi, p58.

⁷⁵ Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p165.

⁷⁶ Thorn, p68.

I have always thought that one way in which young Oxbridge men of the early [nineteenth] century showed their love for each other was by marrying their friend's sister. I don't mean that Hallam wasn't appropriately in love with Emily Tennyson, only that there might well have been a unique intimacy (and I would venture some unconscious sexual frisson) in being engaged to a close friend's sister [. . .] There is a sort of twinhood in brother-in-lawhood, especially before the marriage itself.⁷⁷

Support for Wolff's hunch was outweighed by energetic dismissal, particularly from Jack Kolb who shut down discussion by labelling it "an easy theory" and offering the inevitable retort that "some Victorian men married sisters of men that they loved; [. . .] some Victorian men married sisters of men they had no interest in."⁷⁸

Kolb's responses reflect his wider project to reject *all* identifications of an erotic dynamic in the relationship between Tennyson and Hallam. He has since published 'Hallam, Tennyson, Homosexuality and the Critics', an article that reads as an untimely attempt to set 'straight' the interventions of queer theory through an aggressive attempt to discredit the biographical aspects of the enabling work of scholars such as Richard Dellamora and Alan Sinfield.⁷⁹ Kolb cites Hallam's engagement to Emily Tennyson as a piece of "pertinent data that these critics seldom – if ever – mention."⁸⁰ According to Kolb's heterosexist logic, such "pertinent data" translates as facts that pertain to a heterosexuality that in its unambivalent coherence will nullify all discoveries of homoeroticism. In his earlier collection of Arthur Hallam's letters, Kolb presents Arthur's epistles to Emily as material that will "put such [homoerotic] suspicions finally to rest – if indeed such things are still suspect."⁸¹ Hallam's engagement, then, is repeatedly positioned as proof of exclusive heterosexuality. However, as this section has shown, Hallam's and Tennyson's representations of their triangulated relationship repeatedly challenge the heterosexuality

⁷⁷ Michael Wolff, posting to VICTORIA discussion list, May 1997.

⁷⁸ Jack Kolb, posting to VICTORIA discussion list, May 1997.

⁷⁹ Jack Kolb, 'Hallam, Tennyson, Homosexuality and the Critics', *Philological Quarterly*, 79.3 (2000), pp365-396. In the 1997 VICTORIA discussion Kolb admitted that his concern about appearing homophobic was impeding his progress with this article. The piece is, however, intensely heterosexist. Kolb is "momentarily reassured" by critical acknowledgements that it is difficult to classify the Hallam/Tennyson relationship as homosexual; homoerotic approaches to *In Memoriam* are formulated as "allegations" (p373) and so the heterosexist rhetoric continues.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p387.

⁸¹ Jack Kolb, (ed.), *The Letters of Arthur Henry Hallam* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1981), p17.

that Hallam's engagement is held to represent. Thus, the omission of the engagement in those studies interested in exploring desire between Tennyson and Hallam, can be criticised not for a deliberate silencing of heterosexual proof, but as an unfortunate neglect of suggestive homoerotic material. Rather than reasserting his heterosexuality, Hallam's engagement reveals the same-sex erotics that it attempts to contain.

This thesis does not allow heterosexist silencing to prevent wider recognition of the homoerotic potential of in-lawing, a possibility repeatedly articulated in 'gut-reaction' responses to such relationships. The current project aims to establish an academically credible theoretical model for in-lawing as homoerotic strategy, by combining anecdotal approaches with theories about families of choice, desire transference, and the bodily interchangeability of brother and sister.

"You Haven't Got a Sister Have You?" – Eroticising the Model: Shared Love Gifts and Male Feasting

Through particular reworkings of the inter-marital alliances forged by close male friends, Dickens's novels insistently eroticise what was a familiar marital pattern in this period. What became a career long interest in in-lawing appears in Dickens's first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*. "Very particular friends" and fellow medical students Bob Sawyer and Ben Allen share an ardent hope of becoming linked through Bob's marriage to Ben's sister, Arabella (p391). In a hyperbolic description of his fervent interest in this match, Ben Allen comically reveals that this shared male hope is the only basis of his sister's "destiny":

'I designed 'em for each other; they were made for each other, sent into the world for each other, born for each other [. . .] There's a special destiny in the matter, my dear Sir; there's only five years' difference between 'em, and both their birthdays are in August' [. . .] Mr Ben Allen, after a tear or two, went on to say, that, notwithstanding all his esteem and respect and veneration for his friend, Arabella had unaccountably and undutifully evinced the most determined antipathy to his person (p511).

In his eagerness to advance the scheme Ben displays a cruelty to his sister – "Her happiness is no object to me" (p639) – similar to that of Charley to Lizzie Hexam in an exactly parallel scenario. Although Ben is well aware of his sister's dislike for his favoured suitor

he is furious at her refusal to comply with the project and makes her a domestic prisoner in the hope of forcing her to reconsider. When Bob, like Bradley Headstone, reveals his doubts regarding Arabella's inclination, Ben responds with brotherly bluster, reminiscent of Charley Hexam: "She *shall* have you or I'll know the reason why – I'll exert my authority" (p634). Arabella justly describes her brother's uncharacteristic behaviour on this issue as "so unkind, so unreasonable" (p526), "so violent, so prejudiced [. . .] so, so anxious in behalf of his friend, Mr Sawyer" (p629).

The financial benefits of such a scheme do contribute to Ben's ardency on Bob's behalf:

'You must make yourself, with as little delay as possible, master of Arabella's one thousand pounds [. . .] She has it when she comes of age, or marries. She wants a year of coming of age, and if you plucked up a spirit she needn't want a month of being married' (p633).

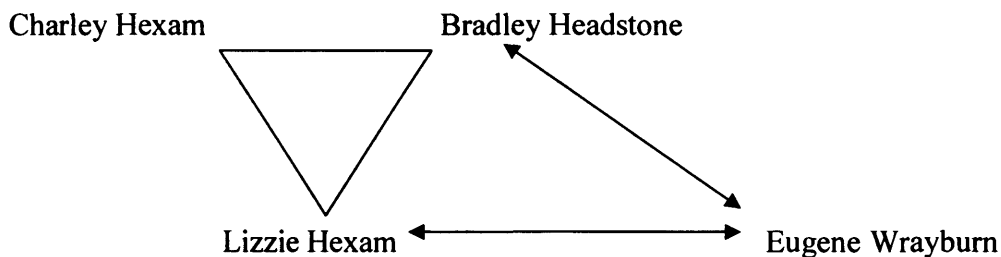
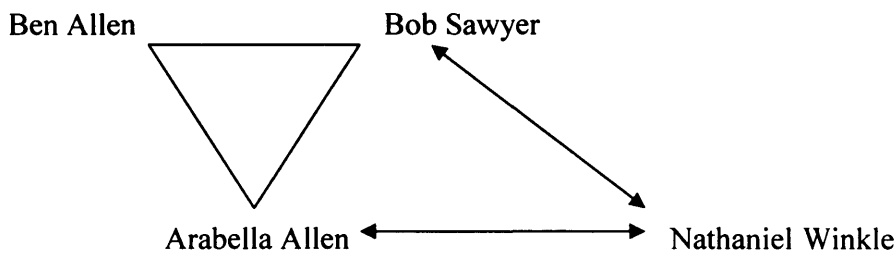
However, as with the corresponding relationship in *Our Mutual Friend*, the monetary motive is portrayed as part of a more complex plethora of less utterable desires. Much of Ben's anger at Arabella's reticence is provoked by a conviction shared by the two male friends that a rival has usurped the position intended for Bob. This conjecture is partly accurate as Arabella does indeed prefer Mr Winkle, a young protégé of Mr Pickwick.

When Arabella marries Mr Winkle, Sam Weller offers the following soothing reflection to the disappointed friends:

P'raps that gen'lm'n may think as there vos a priory 'tachment, but there vorn't nothin' o' the sort, for the young lady said in the very beginnin' o' the keepin' company that she couldn't abide him. Nobody's cut him out, and it 'ud ha' been just the very same for him if the young lady had never seen Mr Vinkle [. . .] I hope I've now made that 'ere gen'lm'n's mind easy (pp640-1).

This 'consolation' is paralleled exactly in *Our Mutual Friend* by Lizzie Hexam's cuttingly frank response to Bradley Headstone's insistence that a rival has thwarted him: "It makes me able to tell you that I do not like you, and that I have never liked you from the first, and that no other living creature has anything to do with the effect you have produced upon me for yourself" (p392).

The Pickwick Papers present (in an apparently less threatening form) an exact parallel to that disruption of a triangular male scheme of in-lawing by the arrival of a rival, enacted with near-fatal violence in *Our Mutual Friend*.



Although Ben and Bob's threats are always diffused with comic bathos, their ardent mutual commitment to the in-law project is repeatedly expressed through the rhetoric of violence:

Mr Ben Allen [. . .] confided to Mr Winkle, as an especially eligible person to intrust [sic.] the secret to, that he was resolved to cut the throat of any gentleman except Mr Bob Sawyer who should aspire to the affections of his sister Arabella (p428).

When Mr Winkle enquires about the identity of this object of rivalry, Ben mimes a violent cranial attack of exactly the kind that Bradley Headstone actually inflicts on Eugene Wrayburn: "Mr Ben Allen seized the poker, flourished it in a warlike manner above his head, inflicted a savage blow on an imaginary skull, and wound up by saying, in a very expressive manner, that he only wished he could guess – that was all" (p511). Indeed, Bob and Ben are further bonded through a shared wish to "assassinate" the competition:

'I wish I knew whether any rascal has been tampering with her, and attempting to engage her affections. I think I should assassinate him, Bob.'
'I'd put a bullet in him if I found him out,' said Mr Sawyer [. . .] 'If that

didn't do his business, I'd extract it afterwards and kill him that way' (p633).

On discovering Arabella's marriage Bob continues with his language of pistol duelling, threatening to make an 'object' of her husband at "twelve paces." Again the potential for violence is deflated into comic bathos as Bob weakens his threat "with some general observations concerning the punching of heads and knocking out of eyes, which were commonplace by comparison" (p639). Whilst Dickens's first novel avoids the murderous conclusion that it insistently suggests, these (albeit comical) statements of violent intent function to dramatise the extreme male investment in the projected brother-in-law relationship.

The hasty diffusion of Ben and Bob's initial displays of fury on receiving news of Arabella's marriage also signals the complete personal insignificance of Arabella in their plans. After a very short period for contemplation and a few soothing applications to a black bottle, Bob Sawyer's rivalrous anger has so far dissipated that he begs "to propose the health and happiness of Mr and Mrs Winkle, whose felicity, *so far from envying, he would be the first to congratulate them upon*" (p641, emphasis added). This total reversal of envy to congratulation, heartily supported by Ben, clearly demonstrates that Arabella had never been the ultimate aim. Once the potential for Ben and Bob to become united in affinal brotherhood is denied, Bob can face the 'loss' of Arabella with absolute calm. Denied the female mediation necessary to both cement and sanction their intensity of feeling, Ben and Bob seek an alternative social setting within which their attachment can be accommodated without mediation. They relocate to Bengal together, a place perceived as an exotic and sexually permissive locale by Dickens's society. In this emigration they set a pattern for numbers of later Dickens characters, whose desires are not accepted within British society.⁸²

The immediate dissolution of Bob's animosity for his ostensible rival is perfectly consistent with the friends' repeated use of Ben's sister to enable their own relationship. They never discuss Arabella's own characteristics, and refer to her only in contexts that actually reflect their own intimacy:

'You have loved her from a child, my friend – you loved her when we were

⁸² This use of homotropical relocation receives full attention in chapter four.

boys at school together, and even then she was wayward, and slighted your young feelings. Do you recollect, with all the eagerness of a child's love, one day pressing upon her acceptance two small carraway-seed biscuits and one sweet apple, neatly folded into a circular parcel with the leaf of a copy book?

'I do,' replied Bob Sawyer.

'She slighted that, I think?' said Ben Allen.

'She did,' rejoined Bob. 'She said I had kept the parcel so long in the pockets of my corduroys, that the apple was unpleasantly warm.'

'I remember,' said Mr Allen, gloomily. 'Upon which we ate it ourselves, in alternate bites' (p634).

This shared memory is highly revealing of the homoerotic function of the intermediate female. Bob Sawyer's attempted courtship of Arabella Allen permits his actual courtship of her brother, as Arabella's rejection of the offering enables a male sharing of what have been explicitly identified as love gifts.

Given the Victorian association of eating with sexual appetite, Bob's selection of offering is as inappropriate for Arabella as Jarndyce's (inevitably unsuccessful) effort to tempt Esther with rich goose-liver pie and a plum cake with "sugar on the outside an inch thick, like fat on mutton chops" in *Bleak House* (p37). As both Helena Michie and Gail Turley Houston have amply demonstrated, "conventionally the heroine in the Victorian novel is not shown eating or enjoying food, for to the Victorians such actions usually implied sexual desire".⁸³

The portrait of the appropriately sexed woman, then, emerges as one who eats little and eats delicately.⁸⁴

Michie also documents a deep moral and religious anxiety about the female consumption of fruit in etiquette manuals of the time. Such texts direct "the safest way for ladies" to eat fruit and warn men: "Don't touch fruit with [your] fingers when preparing it for a lady."⁸⁵ Michie relates such concern to a preoccupation with original sin, an anxiety heightened when the chosen fruit is an apple. Furthermore, "Victorian folk wisdom taught that gluttony led to ugliness, and if a young girl expected to be loved, she would restrain her

⁸³ Gail Turley Houston, *Consuming Fictions: Gender, Class and Hunger in Dickens's Novels* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1994), p43.

⁸⁴ Helena Michie, *Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1987), p17.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p19.

appetite” especially for those food groups deemed most fattening, including fruit and sweets.⁸⁶ Thus apples and biscuits were singularly inappropriate gifts for a ‘young girl’; indeed they are designated as boyish fare within the strictly gendered organisation of public consumption that *Pickwick* presents. At Bob Sawyer’s bachelor party a ‘case’ is related in which a boy who only two minutes after his leg had been removed from its socket ate “five apples and a gingerbread cake” (p422). The combination of the novel’s specific example of these eatables as particularly relished by boys with the wider cultural prohibition on female conspicuous consumption, particularly of sweet foods, casts suspicion on the intended recipient. Bob selects gifts which are less suitable for the courting of Arabella than for the wooing of her more corpulent brother, whose “stout, thick-set” body is a marker of his apparently insatiable appetite (p392).

Arabella’s inevitable rejection of these edible presents results in a male sharing of food, which is a reliable index of emotional bonding in Dickens’s fiction. Contemporary reviewers were alert to the combination of social and erotic work performed by eating in these novels:

Mr Dickens could not get over the notion that a love scene was a rich and luscious sort of juice, to be sucked up in the sort of way in which a bowl of punch and a Christmas dinner are so often enjoyed in his tales.⁸⁷

Patricia Ingham convincingly argues that female sexual availability is signalled through association with rich food stuffs, so that Dickens’s nubile women are themselves “sucked up.” However, her reading of the *Spectator* review demonstrates the difficulty of separating the erotic nuances of eating from repeated representations of the extreme pleasure of exclusively male feasting:

Dickens’s obsession with food generally, especially as an occasion of or source for male conviviality, is a point well taken. As the reviewer goes on to make clear, however, he is referring specifically to scenes where women are involved.⁸⁸

Both Ingham and the reviewer perpetuate the heterosexual assumption that has illogically structured critical readings of food as simultaneously an *erotic* currency in mixed-sex

⁸⁶ Houston, p48.

⁸⁷ Unsigned review, *Spectator*, October 1870, rpt. in Phillip Collins, *The Critical Heritage* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971), pp547-550, p549.

⁸⁸ Patricia Ingham, *Dickens, Women and Language* (Hertfordshire: Harvester, 1992), p31.

scenarios, and an *un-sensual*, purely social enabler between men. Whilst alimential significance varies hugely in Dickens's multiple presentations of dining (it has been calculated that in *Pickwick* alone there are "thirty five breakfasts, thirty two dinners, ten teas, eight suppers, while drink is mentioned two hundred and forty nine times", and as Houston demonstrates food has a range of socio-economic, familial and gender applications as well as sexual importance in Dickens's work) the erotic implications of eating clearly cannot pertain exclusively to heterosexual scenes.⁸⁹ Ian Watt's comment that given the "traditional cooperation of food, drink and laughter with Eros [. . .] oral pleasures were substituted for sexual ones in the Victorian novel" can be usefully applied to those male relationships in Dickens's work that are firmly based on a mutual oral gratification through food.⁹⁰

The link between sexual and alimential appetite is relentlessly reinforced in *The Pickwick Papers*. Pickwick's correspondence with Mrs Bardell about "Chops and Tomata sauce" (p454) is deployed by Sergeant Buzfuz as irrefutable evidence of Pickwick's amorous intentions, and the rounded figure of Mr Wardle's servant, the Fat Boy, provides a constant embodiment of the various types of insatiability. James Kincaid observes that "the most pointed of the novel's erotic impulses" circulate around this corpulent character:

He is always showing up at love scenes to look and listen, to gaze [. . .] He watches kissing with a 'dark and gloomy joy' and is always right around the corner, walking in without knocking, when there is something lascivious underway.⁹¹

This correspondence of appetites has important resonances for the relationship between Ben Allen and Bob Sawyer; the friends are closely linked through a sensuous love of food and drink, gaining maximum gratification from privately shared oral indulgence. When Mr Pickwick first meets the duo he is surprised at their decision to overnight together at a neighbouring public house rather than staying with the company. In explanation the two friends list a number of consumables "too good to leave in a hurry", (brandy, cigars and pork chops) on whose quality they heartily agree (p365). The erotic connotations of mutual eating are intensified in their schoolboy reminiscence of eating the rejected love gifts

⁸⁹ Ian Watt, 'Oral Dickens', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 3 (1974), pp165-181, p165.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p180.

⁹¹ Kincaid, 'Fattening Up', p243.

together in “alternate bites”, with the corresponding close mouths and shared saliva that would necessarily result from such a method of consumption. Arabella is repulsed by the proffered goods as a bodily extension of Bob – in his trouser pockets they have spent too long in close proximity to his body (more specifically to his genitals), until the “apple was unpleasantly warm.” Importantly, Ben has none of these scruples, readily eating the literal fruit of Bob’s loins. The symbolism of male genitalia is strengthened by the specific details of food stuffs offered. Whilst the intimately warmed apple represents phallic forbidden fruit, the “two small caraway-seed biscuits” substitute for the testicular seed-producers of Bob’s body.

Lest this seem an overly juicy interpretation, the pattern by which an intermediary sister facilitates the oral pleasures of her brother and his male favourite is reinforced through its reiteration in Dickens’s best known example of a brother-sister-suitor triangle. Scenes of feasting strongly signal the homoeroticism between the male members of Dickens’s most notorious triad of Tom Pinch, Ruth Pinch and John Westlock in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844). In both novels the homoerotic potential for sibling substitution is further fleshed out through a simultaneous exploration of the men’s wider shared appetites for food. John Westlock is yet another ‘suitor’ who follows the compulsive pattern identified by Sedgwick and played out in so many fictional and biographical accounts of the period. It only takes “a glimpse” of his closest friend’s sister for John to immediately wish to be in Tom’s place, being kissed by her.⁹² Indeed, the graffiti of ‘Tom’s Corner’ of the room the two young men have shared at Pecksniff’s suggests John’s earlier fantasy of a sister figure as a particularly suitable relative to mediate their otherwise too intense relationship:

Every pupil had added something, even unto fancy portraits of his [Tom’s] father with one eye, and of his mother with a disproportionate nose, and especially of his sister: who always being presented as extremely beautiful, made full amends to Tom for any other joke (p474).

On meeting Ruth Pinch, John ruminates on the physical superiority of the real over the fantasised sister, describing the portraits as “gross-libels, and not half pretty enough: though [. . .] the artists always made those sketches beautiful, and he had drawn at least a score of them with his own hands” (p573). This subtle admission reveals John’s emotional

⁹² Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (London: Penguin, 1999), p553. All further references are to this edition and are given in parentheses within the text.

investment in the bare concept of 'Tom's sister', the relational designation that is applied to Ruth more often than her own name. Ruth's body fulfils the longings of this principle fantasist, providing him with a female incarnation of his beloved friend.

Although the similarity between Tom and Ruth is not expressed through an exact physical transposition (as with the sibling body doubles discussed in the next section), Ruth echoes the kind, cheerful and gentle manner which most characterises her brother, delivering herself with "Tom's own simplicity and Tom's own smile" (p140):

There was something of her brother, much of him indeed, in a certain gentleness of manner, and in her look of timid trustfulness (p138).

Her similarity to Tom and her inseparableness from him, mean that Ruth both embodies the most admired attributes of her brother and guarantees the permanence of a male in-law connection forged through her marriage. As the sequence of significant feasting scenes suggests, she is simultaneously facilitator and substitute.

Tom Pinch and John Westlock are repeatedly reunited through feast scenes of much anticipated shared oral indulgence. Tom's anguish at their initial parting is figured through his comparison of the coach that bears John away to "some great monster [. . .] more exulting and rampant than usual" in the seizure of such a "prize" (p35). Their emotional reunion effects the realisation of previously only fantasised pleasures of the palate:

'I have ordered everything for dinner, that we used to say we'd have, Tom,' observed John Westlock.

'No!' said Tom Pinch, 'Have you?' (p196)

They dine at great expense on an elaborate bill of fare of soup, fish, side dishes, top and bottom, birds and sweets. Such rich variety of foodstuffs was recommended in sample entertaining menus of the time, such as that provided by Catherine Dickens under the pseudonym of Lady Maria Clutterbuck. In *What Shall We Have for Dinner?* Catherine Dickens proposes similarly digestively-challenging menus to the spread laid on by John Westlock. The main courses alone of Clutterbuck's recommended fare for a large dinner party include "Mushroom Patties, Lobster Cutlet, Lamb's Cutlet with cucumber sauce, Rabbit curry smothered with white sauce, Roast Haunch of Mutton, Boiled Fowl and

Tongue, Spinach, New Potatoes, Salad, Duckling, Guinea Fowl, Asparagus.”⁹³

Importantly, these menus are addressed to wives as an alimential strategy for keeping their husbands at home. In the preface the Clutterbook persona outlines the damaging impact of poor catering on marital relations, blaming unappetising dinners for “making the Club more attractive than the Home, and rendering ‘business in the city’ of more frequent occurrence than it used to be in the earlier days of [. . .] connubial experience.”⁹⁴ Lady Clutterbuck prides herself on the success of her administration to her husband’s stomach:

I am consoled in believing that my attention to the requirements of his appetite secured me in the possession of his esteem until the last.⁹⁵

Given Dickens’s well documented love of fine dining this comical frame has its basis in an actual concern of his household. Whether composed by Dickens as a gentle warning to his wife, or by Catherine as a humorous recognition of her husband’s needs, the preface establishes a slippage between the culinary and the connubial.

This contemporary cultural endorsement of the maxim linking male hearts and stomachs gives a romantic dimension to John Westlock’s repeated provision of such ideal menus for Tom Pinch’s gratification. The realisation of the fantasised feast “at the very first hotel in the town” (p193) is followed by another food fuelled reunion at John’s lodgings. John’s articulations of delight at seeing Tom are interpolated with his persistent encouragement of the appetite of his unexpected guest:

While he was delivering himself of these words in a state of great commotion, John was constantly running backwards and forwards to and from the closet, bringing out all sorts of things in pots, scooping extraordinary quantities of tea out of the caddy, dropping French rolls into his boots, pouring hot water over the butter (p533).

When Tom tucks into these “irreconcilable and contradictory viands”, John contemplates “his visitor’s proceedings, with infinite satisfaction” (p534). In John’s persistent anxiety about his friend’s alimential gratification he conforms closely to the Clutterbuck model of a wife whose appeal is measured by her provision. Indeed, only after observing Ruth Pinch’s

⁹³ Lady Maria Clutterbuck (alias Catherine Dickens), *What Shall We Have for Dinner?* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1852), p42.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pvi. Slater believes that this preface was authored by Dickens on his wife’s behalf (*Dickens and Women*, p132).

⁹⁵ Clutterbuck, pv.

competence at simultaneously catering for both himself and Tom does John relinquish his “attention to the requirements of his [friend’s] appetite.”

John first enters the Pinch’s aptly configured home, with “the triangular parlour and the two small bed-rooms” (p564), on the occasion of Ruth’s beefsteak pudding experiment. His flattery of Ruth’s culinary capacity as “such an agreeable domestic occupation, so very agreeably and skilfully pursued” (p568) coheres with the strategically over-egged joke that he and Tom entertain “tremendous expectations” of this pudding (p570). Though comically over-inflated, John’s courtship of Ruth is structured around a constant repetition of pudding puns that focus on its oral gratification of the two men.⁹⁶ In a mirroring of Bob Sawyer’s alimential gifts to his best friend’s sister, John’s first offering to Ruth is the “merry present of a cookery-book [. . .] with the beefsteak-pudding leaf turned down, and blotted out” (p 582). Given the reiterated culinary coding of the emotional bonds between John and Tom, Ruth’s status as successful caterer further marks her intermediary function in the male relationship. The pudding scene seduces through its dramatisation of Ruth’s ability to play the domestic goddess for both men, allowing John to relinquish his elaborate and inappropriately gendered housekeeping by joining this family of choice.

Images of the triadic configuration of his relation to the Pinches dominate John’s proposal to Ruth: “Tom had not come in. They entered the triangular parlour together, and alone” (p764). This persuasive (il)logic of lone togetherness in the absence of Tom is clarified by the newly engaged couples’ fervent inclusion of Tom in their future arrangements. Immediately after the proposal “they began to talk of Tom again” (p764), anticipating his wants in the significantly alimential phrase, “catering for Tom” (p766):

Leave Tom! That would be a strange beginning. Leave Tom, dear! If Tom and we be not inseparable, and Tom (God bless him) have not all honour and all love in our home, my little wife, may that home never be! (p765)

⁹⁶ Chapters thirty-nine and forty-five are liberally seasoned with pudding humour, including John’s significant slip, where the distracting pudding displaces his actual meaning (p571). These jokes culminate in the men’s hyperbolic enjoyment of Ruth’s successful substitution of flour and eggs for suet, which forces Tom to “stop [. . .] in Temple Bar to laugh; and it was no more to Tom, that he was anathematized and knocked about by the surly passengers, than it would have been to a post; for he continued to exclaim with unabated good humour ‘flour and eggs! a beefsteak pudding made with flour and eggs!’” (p647).

Ruth's corresponding eagerness to maintain her sibling relationship, "I could never leave Tom" (p765), has often been read as suggestive of incestuous longing.⁹⁷ Robert Lougy, for example, convincingly argues that "Hablot K. Browne's brilliant final illustration is visual testimony to the novel's refusal to separate brother and sister, as they are bound together in a *ménage à trois* legitimised by Ruth's marriage to John Westlock, itself a screen for deeper motives that we find articulated in Ruth's insistence to her future husband that she will not tolerate separation from her brother."⁹⁸ However, Lougy's alternative account of the 'deeper' erotics that structure this triangle obscures John's investment in Tom's presence. Alexander Welsh's identification of incest through the observation that "the main affective relationship" is shared by Ruth and her brother, rather than Ruth and her suitor, similarly relies on a blind-sightedness to the other powerful affective relationship here, which can be described through an apt Wellerism as "a priori 'tachment'" between the two men. John's desire to include Tom is expressed with an ardency equal to his declaration of love to Ruth; indeed, his proposal is nullified unless Tom is equally involved – without him "may that house never be." Whilst incest can be posited as another motive for brother/sister/suitor patterns, in Dickens's representations of such triangles it is an incomplete explanation which should not be allowed to elide the homoerotic.

An appreciation of the incestuous desire between the Pinches is not, however, incompatible with a reading of desire between John and Tom. Indeed these interlocking erotic attachments may explain why this scenario exclusively is ultimately successful. Of all the brother-sister-suitor triangles that Dickens's work establishes, only the triad of Tom and Ruth Pinch with John Westlock achieves the domestic idyll of permanent cohabitation later anticipated by Bradley Headstone and Charley Hexam. Not coincidentally this triangle is also unique in that its female member has her own (incestuous) erotic motive, and is at no point figured as exploitable portable property between brother and husband. In *Martin Chuzzlewit* and the familial triangles of *Nicolas Nickleby* and *David Copperfield*, the homoerotic impetus is brought into focus by the entire silencing of any economic motive.

⁹⁷ Alexander Welsh has argued that "if anyone, it is really Tom who has discovered the sexual attraction of his sister" (*The City of Dickens*, p150). Slater reinforces this perception in *Dickens and Women*: "[Dickens's] account of the Pinches settling into their new home reads as though he were writing about a couple of self-conscious newly-weds [. . .] It is just as well, one might feel, that Tom's friend, John Westlock, enters when he does to provide another target for Ruth's demure looks" (p364).

⁹⁸ Robert Lougy, 'Repressive and Expressive Forms: The Bodies of Comedy and Desire in *Martin Chuzzlewit*', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 21 (1992), pp37-61, p57.

Whilst minimising alternative explanations of intermarriage, these three novels employ the potential slippage between similar brother and sister pairings (exposed by in-lawing) to explore the divorce of ascribed gender from sexual object choice.

Eroticising the Model: Body Swapping

The similar attributes signalling Tom and Ruth Pinch's potential inter-changeability cohere with a wider homoerotically enabling paradigm of sibling sameness that Dickens exploited throughout his fiction. The cultural expectation of sibling parity is used for comic effect in Dickens's first novel. Ben Allen proposes the family resemblance of himself and his sister as an aid to memory:

‘Perhaps my features may recall her countenance to your recollection?’

Mr Winkle required nothing to recall the charming Arabella to his mind; and it was rather fortunate that he did not, for the features of her brother Benjamin would unquestionably have proved but an indifferent refresher to his memory (p511).

The humour here arises from the unmet expectation of Dickens's first readers that siblings in literature will be significantly similar. This was based on a wider contemporary conception of the family:

In the nineteenth century, family ideology saw siblings of both sexes as being more like than unlike one another, even in looks. A sibling was a part of the home life, assumed to have the same fundamental values [. . .] and the same memories of shared experiences.⁹⁹

Valerie Sanders goes on to explore the construction and reflection of this ideology in fiction of the period. She amasses a wealth of evidence to demonstrate that even opposite-sex “Victorian siblings in literature were regarded as being more alike than different”, as most novelists of that period writing “about sibling pairs, [. . .] stressed the similarities between the brother and sister.”¹⁰⁰

Alfred Tennyson devotes a section of *In Memoriam* to exploring the causes of his similarity to his brother Charles:

⁹⁹ Sanders, p81.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p132, p136.

But thou and I are one in kind,
 As moulded like in Nature's mint;
 And hill and wood and field did print
 The same sweet forms in either mind [. . .]
 At one dear knee we proffer'd vows,
 One lesson from one book we learnt [...]
 And so my wealth resembles thine.¹⁰¹

Importantly, these references to common biology, environment, parenting, religion and education are the identical genetic and cultural inheritances of all the Tennyson children, suggesting Tennyson's awareness of his close similarity to all his siblings, including Emily. Tennyson provides a parallel account of the close correspondence of opposite-sex cousins, reared as foster-siblings, in *The Lover's Tale*. This early poem has been interpreted as Tennyson's reflection on his relationship with Emily:¹⁰²

She was my foster sister: [. . .] one soft lap
 Pillow'd us both: one common light of eyes
 Was on us as we lay: our baby lips,
 Kissing one blossom, ever drew from thence
 The stream of life, one stream, one life, one blood,
 One sustenance, which, still as thought grew large [. . .]
 Perchance assimilated all our tastes
 And future fancies. [. . .]
 So what was earliest mine in earliest life,
 I shared with her in whom myself remains.¹⁰³

The parallel nature and nurture expressed here suggest Tennyson's consciousness that he and Emily could substitute for one another. The emphasis on shared social and biological factors recited in all these examples, is still reiterated today in modern explanations of the special significance of this relationship:

¹⁰¹ Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, poem 79, ln5-8 & 13-14, p47.

¹⁰² See Thorn, p86. Thorn's suggestion that the poem's heroine, Camilla, goes by a name "suggestively close to Emily", is more convincing when applied to Emily's given name, Emilia.

¹⁰³ Tennyson, 'The Lover's Tale' in *Suppressed Poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, ed. by J. C. Thompson (Warwick: Thompson, 1904), pp86-130, pp95-96. Thompson reprints the original version of this poem, composed in 1828. Tennyson had intended that the poem would appear in his 1833 volume. Copies were distributed to friends but just before the general issue he decided to omit it from the published volume. Tennyson reluctantly published a much altered version of the poem in 1879, in an attempt to prevent the poem from circulating in its original, unauthorised and perhaps too personally revealing form.

With our siblings we share the greatest possible degree of similarity (based on the randomness of the gene pool, on shared family history, and so on).¹⁰⁴

As Tennyson's accounts suggest, the bodily similarity of brother and sister has recurrent importance in actual experiences of in-law relationships. Biographers have speculated about the significance of the strong physical resemblance between the Duke of Wellington's wife, Kitty, and her brother, Edward Packenham, a first officer who served Wellington with equal skill and loyalty on military and family fronts. Elizabeth Longford suggests that Edward Packenham's body helped Wellington to remember the desire that he had once felt for the dramatically faded Kitty, helping Wellington to maintain his commitment to what had quickly become a difficult marriage:

Wellington had always been attached to him and the facial likeness between Ned and Kitty was so strong that it is perhaps not fanciful to suggest that Wellington saw in his brother-in-law the looks that long ago were so attractive in his wife.¹⁰⁵

Furthermore, Ned's co-existent commitments to his sister, whose temperament he understood, and to Wellington, who received his hero-worship, helped to maintain some emotional unity between the married couple.¹⁰⁶ After Ned's death, the marriage rapidly declined. Such emotional mediations were probably performed by many brothers-in-law through their simultaneous appreciation of the domestic world and family expectations of their sister and the professional, commercial life of her husband, with whom they often worked and socialised. The social bridge that Packenham offered between male and female spaces was also inscribed on his body in its ambiguous likeness to that of his female sibling. Thus, in actual experiences and fictional examples, ascribed gender differences were challenged by the similarity between male and female siblings.

As briefly discussed in chapter one, near-identical siblings Sally and Sampson Brass operate to destabilise conventional gender 'norms', as part of Dickens's wider undermining of the naturality of ascribed masculinity and femininity in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Sally's

¹⁰⁴ Joanna Stephens Mink and Janet Doubler Ward, (eds.), *The Significance of Sibling Relationships in Literature* (Bowling Green: Popular Press, 1993), p1.

¹⁰⁵ Elizabeth Longford, *Wellington*, 2 vols (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1969), I, p382.

¹⁰⁶ See Longford, p382 and Richard Holmes, *Wellington: The Iron Duke* (London: Harper Collins, 2002), p207.

approximation of Sampson's body incites the attentions of lecherous Quilp, who manifests a similar, particularly physical interest in her brother. Quilp's anger at Sampson's betrayal of their scheme to defraud Nell Trent is expressed as longing (to borrow Sedgwick's terms) for the most intimate violence:

'Oh Sampson!' he muttered, 'good worthy creature – if I could but hug you! If I could only fold you in my arms, and squeeze your ribs, as I *could* squeeze them if I once had you tight, what a meeting there would be between us! If we ever do cross each other again, Sampson, we'll have a greeting not easily to be forgotten, trust me' (p509).

In his reading of this soliloquy as "blindingly queer", Vybarr Cregan-Reid points to the homoerotic function of sibling body doubling: "Dickens also endows [Sampson] with that very useful tool by which desire can be triangulated: a sister who looks so like him that they are sometimes mistaken for one another [. . .] Most significantly, though, it is Sally Brass's daughter, the Marchioness, who is suggested by the text to be Quilp's own daughter by Sally. The heterosexual matrix being completed through Quilp, Sally and the Marchioness allows the dismissal and utter rejection of same-sex desire."¹⁰⁷ Cregan-Reid fails to recognise the homoerotic implications of a putative 'heterosexual' consummation when the female partner offers an almost exact physical replication of her brother's manly body. Far from diffusing the eroticism between Quilp and Sampson, Quilp's illicit sex with Sampson's female body double, whom he calls "Beautiful Sally" (p507), intensifies the implication of same-sex desire.

There is a more muted suggestion of the erotic possibilities of sibling inter-changeability in Dickens's sustained exploration of (near) seduction and (impending) adultery in *Hard Times*. Louisa's relationships with both her 'suitors', Bounderby and Harthouse, are experienced through a complex range of familial triangles, each of which interpose her between suitor and male relative. As Anne Humpherys observes, "Gradgrind for his part has given Louisa to a man 'as near being [his] bosom friend' as possible, an exchange that is in the process of being repeated by Tom 'giving' Louisa to his bosom friend Harthouse."¹⁰⁸ Having prompted his sister's marriage to Bounderby in order to gain a

¹⁰⁷ Cregan-Reid, 'Drowning in Early Dickens', p82, p83.

¹⁰⁸ Anne Humpherys, 'Louisa Gradgrind's Secret: Marriage and Divorce in *Hard Times*', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 25 (1996), pp177-195, p183. In *Patriarchy and Incest from Shakespeare to Joyce* (Florida: Florida

brother-in-law of convenience, Tom Gradgrind then employs her as an object of mediation in his relationship with a man he physically admires. Tom's role in Louisa's marriage echoes Ben Allen's efforts to choose a husband for Arabella and neatly foreshadows Charley Hexam's self-interested influence of his sister: "You know she didn't marry old Bounderby for her own sake, or for his sake, but for my sake":¹⁰⁹

'She wouldn't have been as dutiful, and it would not have come off as easily,' returned the whelp, 'if it hadn't been for me.'

The tempter merely lifted his eyebrows; but the whelp was obliged to go on.

'I persuaded her,' he said, with an edifying air of superiority. 'I was stuck into old Bounderby's bank (where I never wanted to be), and I knew I

should get into scrapes there, if she put old Bounderby's pipe out; so I told

her my wishes and she came into them. She would do anything for me' (p134).

In these revelations to the man he admires and finds an intimacy with "so very agreeable" and "uncommonly pleas[ing]" (pp132-133), Tom seeks to impress and cement his relationship with Harthouse specifically by demonstrating his previous willingness to further male relationships. In Tom's example, Louisa's fantasised absolute pliancy undermines the heterosexual structure that motivates the exchange from family to husband, rendering this an account not of Bounderby's marriage to her, but of the allegiance formed between him and Tom.¹¹⁰ The relative status of each member of this triangle in Tom's narration is neatly conveyed by his repeated naming of 'old Bounderby' in comparison to the anonymity he accords Louisa, who is figured here as a nameless facilitator. In the exaggerated all-encompassing "she would do *anything* for me", Tom claims a possessive power over Louisa suggestive of his ability to exploit his influence to effect a replacement of Bounderby's position in this triangle with Harthouse. Tom's erotic interest in using his cross-gender sibling relationship to strengthen his relationship with Harthouse is apparent. "More than ever disposed to admire his new friend", Tom anatomises him, dwelling on

UP, 1998) Jane Ford reads repeated jealous and eroticised configurations of father/daughter/suitor as "the triangle" in Dickens (p55). Whilst the wealth of homoerotic in-law triangles suggests the limitation of Ford's singular model, her (sometimes dubious psycho-biographical) identification of "Dickens's lifelong preoccupation" with marriages structured around another form of 'aberrant' desire provides further evidence of Dickens's commitment to non-normative families of choice.

¹⁰⁹ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (London: Penguin, 2003), p172. All further references are to this edition and are given in parentheses within the text.

¹¹⁰ Louisa's later abandonment of Bounderby firmly demonstrates that her unending pliancy exists only in Tom's fantasy. This distinction is significant in illustrating that neither the novel nor this account present a simple perpetuation of misogynist practises of traffic in women.

particularly appealing physical features and “his dress”, especially his impressive possession of “such a waistcoat”, “such a voice” and “such a pair of whiskers” (pp132-133).

The cultural, educational and implicit physical parity of brother and sister suggests that Tom’s attraction is not entirely unreciprocated. Whilst Harthouse’s excessive professions to Louisa of his “interest” in her brother – “I am interested in him for his own sake” (p166) – operate primarily to further the plot of heterosexual seduction, the overlaps between these siblings suggest the underlying sincerity of his inter-male avowals. Harthouse is well aware of the possibility of sibling substitution, again ostensibly deploying this understanding in the interests of heterosexual enticement: “He was a ready man, and he saw, and seized an opportunity of presenting her own image to her slightly disguised as her brother” (p168). Through what requires only a “slight” imaginative adjustment, Harthouse demonstrates the inter-changeability of siblings that share “training”, “society” and affinal and consanguinal relations (p169). Indeed, Harthouses’s ‘interest’ in Louisa is explicitly catalysed by her particularly close relationship to her brother. He is fascinated by Louisa’s affection for Tom, closely scrutinising her pleasure in her brother’s company (p130): “Mr James Harthouse began to think it would be a new sensation, if the face which changed so beautifully for the whelp, would change for him” (p164).

The potential for the cross-gender inter-changeability of brother and sister is shaped into a major strategy for expressing same-sex desire throughout Dickens’s fiction. The closest bodily replicas of twins Neville and Helena Landless – “an unusually handsome lithe fellow, and an unusually handsome lithe girl, much alike” (p58) – are used in *Edwin Drood* for a sustained exploration of desire between women. The absolute equivalence of these siblings, doubled through both nature and nurture, is repeatedly stressed: “Miss Helena, you and your brother were twin children. You came into this world with the same dispositions, and you passed your younger days together surrounded by the same adverse circumstances” (p108). Dickens’s use here of opposite-sex ‘identical’ twins apparently follows a long-established homoerotic tradition most readily associated with Shakespeare.¹¹¹ However, Dickens consistently alters the traditional *Twelfth Night* model in which a woman falls in

¹¹¹ For a literary history of opposite-sex twins see Carolyn Heilbrun, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (New York and London: Norton, 1964, rpt. 1993).

love with girl-twin masquerading as boy-twin, onto whom she later transfers her affections – or vice-versa.¹¹² Dickens suppresses the element of passing so that the sex of each twin is fully apparent in erotic situations, making each scenario less about clothes and more about bodies. In his insistence that the primary connection is maintained between the same-sex characters, Dickens alters a technique of cheeky, homosexually suggestive gender confusion into a nuanced and culturally resonant strategy for articulating lasting same-sex desire.

In *Edwin Drood* a mysterious telepathy exists between the twins, giving a particular frisson to Helena's relationship with the woman ardently desired by her physically and mentally similar brother. As Neville puts it, "You don't know [. . .] what a complete understanding can exist between my sister and me, though no spoken word – perhaps hardly as much as a look – may have passed between us" (p65). Such "complete understanding" exists between them on the question of Rosa's attractiveness. Helena similarly experiences a compulsive "fascination" in Rosa ("My pretty one, can I help it?") and on hearing that Edwin insufficiently desires Miss Bud she reacts with an "earnestness that threatened to blaze into ferocity" (p69), highly reminiscent of her brother's violent infuriation with Edwin's languid suit. Brenda Ayres argues that Helena's "identity is closely entwined with her brother's, so that she feels the same kind of love that he feels for Rosebud [. . .] Helena, so identical to her brother and often assuming a male disguise, desires Rosebud as a male would [. . .] The text gives Helena a twin's identity and allows her to dress as a male to legitimise the love between Helena and Rosa. As long as Helena passes as Neville, she may also pass as a lover of Rosa."¹¹³ Whilst the doubling of these siblings allows a highly explicit articulation of homoerotics, Helena's 'passing' as male is demonstrably incomplete. Ayres's account does not acknowledge the complexity of a verisimilitude effected through siblings, in which Helena's body can both approximate her brother's *and* retain its womanly charms. It is this incarnation of desire *in a woman* that Rosa specifically enjoys – "I am such a mite

¹¹² Late in the nineteenth century Sarah Grand was to make an effective partial use of such a model in *The Heavenly Twins* (1893). For discussion of the Grand's use of opposite sex twins to "blur conventional boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality" see Teresa Mangum, 'Sex, Siblings and the Fin de Siècle' in *The Significance of Sibling Relationships in Literature*, pp70-82, p80.

¹¹³ Ayres, *Dissenting Women*, p108, p109.

of a thing and you are so womanly and handsome” (p69), “Hold me! Stay with me! I am too frightened to be left by myself” (p71).¹¹⁴

At the risk of adding to a long tradition of ‘Droodian’ armchair detection, it can also be suggested that this unfinished text leaves scope for a second positive continuation of homoerotics through in-lawing, in line with that achieved by Tom Pinch and John Westlock. The narrative remains open for a resolution of Rosa’s and Helena’s desire for one another and an establishment of a permanent, legally enshrined connection between the women through the intermarriage of Rosa and Neville.¹¹⁵ The potential erotic satisfaction of each member of this triangle, uniquely experienced by the successful Pinch triad, adds weight to this speculation.

Slater believes that in the rendering of the Landless twins, the “rigid sexual polarities that had tended up to this point to dominate Dickens’s characterisation were beginning to give way to a freer and more complex rendering of gender in human beings.”¹¹⁶ Carolyn Heilbrun similarly sees Dickens’s use of opposite-sex twins as “a sign, perhaps, that Dickens, had he lived, would have departed still further from the caricature of women which marked all but his latest novels.”¹¹⁷ However, *Edwin Drood* merely reiterates a career-long interest in exploring the nuances of same-sex desire through opposite-sex siblings. Although the focus alters from male to female homoerotics, the familial verisimilitude of Sampson and Sally operates very similarly to the biological twinship of Helena and Neville, with both sibling pairs participating in a wider destabilising of gender as well as (hetero)sexual conventions.¹¹⁸ The use of sibling body doubling to articulate male homoeroticism is particularly explicit in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839) and *David Copperfield* (1850). Both novels are simultaneously concerned with the use of intermarriage to further male relationships, and the strong physical resemblance between

¹¹⁴ Even Slater acknowledges that in their intimate dialogues Helena and Rosa “sound more like a passionate lover and his coy mistress than two schoolgirls, even two Victorian schoolgirls making friends” (*Dickens and Women*, p289).

¹¹⁵ Droodian speculator Ina Roe Hark critiques the ready acceptance of Forster’s belief that Rosa would marry Tartar, suggesting a variety of alternative husbands, including Neville [‘Marriage in the Symbolic Framework of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*’, *Studies in the Novel*, 9.2 (1977), pp154-168]. Indeed, this was the chosen ending of the 1935 Universal film version of *Drood*.

¹¹⁶ Slater, *Dickens and Women*, p295.

¹¹⁷ Heilbrun, p41.

¹¹⁸ Twins are further used in *Bleak House* for critique of the social assignment of male and female roles in the equally businesslike and avaricious “Bartholomew and Judith Smallweed, twins” (p333).

family members. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, the benevolent Cheeryble brothers – twins with barely “a perceptible difference between them”¹¹⁹ – plan an intermarriage of a type Davidoff identifies as common, where “two brothers from one family would marry two sisters from another.”¹²⁰ The interconnections forged here are shown to be the primary aim; when one of the sisters inconveniently dies the whole strategy is abandoned and the second sister marries another man of her choice, whilst the brothers choose permanent cohabiting bachelordom (p565). Nicholas himself fantasises openly about socially advancing intermarriage (through his sister and body double, Kate), as the culmination of a successful career path:

Suppose some young nobleman who is being educated at the Hall, were to take a fancy to me, and get his father to appoint me his travelling tutor when he left, and when he got back from the continent, procured me some handsome appointment [. . .] And who knows, but when he came to see me when I was settled (as he would of course), he might fall in love with Kate, who would be keeping my house – and – marry her, eh! (p41)

The novel repeatedly demonstrates that Kate and Nicholas offer identical attractions. Ralph Nickleby, relying on the expected feminine pliancy of the sister, is surprised by the similarity in temperament between opposite sex siblings:

‘There is some of that boy’s blood in you, I see’, said Ralph, speaking in his harshest tones, as something of the flashing eye reminded him of Nicholas at their last meeting (p355).

Added to the same blood is a shared history of “all the happy days [. . .] all the comfort and happiness of home” (p249), which makes the pair virtually indistinguishable within the domestic setting. Mrs Nickleby even requests one of her children to substitute for both: “‘I am so sorry Nicholas is not at home’ said Mrs Nickleby. ‘Kate, my dear, you must be both Nicholas and yourself’” (p605). This inter-changeability is most often expressed in physical terms:

As the brother and sister stood side by side with a gallant bearing which became them well, a close likeness between them was apparent, which many,

¹¹⁹ Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* (London: Penguin, 1999), p432. All further references are to this edition and are given in parentheses within the text.

¹²⁰ Davidoff, *Worlds Between*, p214.

had they only seen them apart, might have failed to remark. The air, carriage, and very look and expression of the brother were all reflected in the sister, but softened and refined to the nicest limit of feminine attraction (p672).

By establishing these levels of absolute similarity, Dickens's novel coheres with a wider contemporary representation of the opposite-sex sibling bond as "one in which gender difference is rendered secondary to the tie of blood likeness, familiarity and friendship."¹²¹ This prioritising of familial sameness over expected gender difference, creates a space for homoerotic articulation in Dickens's work. Through the in-lawing motif the precedence of heterosexual desire is repeatedly challenged, as the homoerotic basis of many hetero'sexual' commitments is consistently exposed. This novel provides an explicit representation of female familial transference in Madeline Bray's shift of her "warmer feeling" from Kate Nickleby to her brother:

What wonder [. . .] if with the image of Nicolas so constantly recurring in the features of his sister that she could scarcely separate the two, she had sometimes found it equally difficult to assign to each the feelings they had first inspired, and had imperceptibly mingled with her gratitude to Nicholas some of that warmer feeling which she had assigned to Kate (pp680-681).

Such bodily inseparability structures Smike's excitement at discovering that Nicholas has a sister. In an ironic reworking of Nicholas's fantasy of advantageous inter-marriage, the young nobleman of Nicholas's rosy vision of Dotheboys Hall is transfigured into the abused and destitute Smike, whom Nicholas befriends. On his arrival at the brutally run school of Wackford Squeers, Nicholas becomes the first person to treat the much abused Smike "like a human creature" (p147). Smike, a former 'pupil' and now unpaid and virtually unfed drudge of nineteen (p148) forms a profound attachment to his only friend, following "him to and fro with an ever restless desire to serve or help him, anticipating such little wants as his humble ability could supply, and content only to be near him. He would sit beside him for hours looking patiently into his face, and a word would brighten up his care worn visage, and call into it a passing gleam even of happiness" (p147). This adoration only increases with Nicholas's continued care for Smike after the two men flee

¹²¹ Joseph Boone and Deborah Nord, 'Brother and Sister: The Seductions of Siblinghood in Dickens, Eliot and Bronte', *Western Humanities Review*, 46.2 (1992), pp164-188, p165.

the school. Smike again explains his wish to accompany Nicholas in terms of a longing for their physical proximity – “I only want to be near you” (p162). Expressing his frustration at the impossibility of displaying the extent of his feeling, Smike says to Nicholas: “You will never let me serve you as I ought. You will never know how I think day and night of ways to please you” (p267).

Traditionally Smike has been read as “worship [ing . . .] his deliverer” and exhibiting a “dog-like devotion” to Nicholas.¹²² The canine comparison, which frequently recurs in critical descriptions of Smike, obscures the actual complexity of Smike’s multi-faceted and very human response to Nicholas. Combined with his gratitude, loyalty and deep affection is a specifically physical admiration of Nicholas’s body. Smike is repeatedly depicted silently gazing upon Nicholas (p147, p251), and even watching his friend sleep (p162). Physical admiration is half expressed in Smike’s admission that he cannot leave Nicholas: “I tried to go away today, but the thought of your kind face drew me back” (p251). When Nicholas mentions his sister, Smike eagerly seizes the opportunity created by such a mediating figure, to express a specifically physical admiration for Nicholas, that had previously remained almost unspoken:

‘Sister! [. . .] Is she very like you?’ inquired Smike.

‘Why so they say,’ replied Nicholas, laughing, ‘only a great deal handsomer.’

‘She must be *very* beautiful,’ said Smike, after thinking a little while with his hands folded together, and his eyes upon his friend.

‘Anyone who didn’t know you as well as I do, my dear fellow, would say you were an accomplished courtier,’ said Nicholas.

‘I don’t even know what that is,’ replied Smike, shaking his head. ‘Shall I ever see your sister?’ (p359)

Nicholas’s awareness of the intense flattery to himself in this sentiment is no part of a deliberate design by his unsophisticated friend. Smike merely seizes the opportunity presented by the fact of Nicholas’s having a sister to transform his formerly mute gazing and half-expressed sense of his friend’s physical magnetism into a positive statement of his

¹²² A. J. Coppock, ‘Smike’, *Dickensian*, 35 (1939), pp162-163, p163; Nicholas Bently, Micheal Slater, Nina Burgis, (eds.), ‘Smike’, in *The Dickens Index* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1988), p240. Roy Ball, one of the few to argue for a greater complexity to Smike’s character as “an early and at least partially successful attempt by Dickens to produce a personality developing through self-realisation”, suggests that Smike’s “dog-like affection for Nicholas and his family matures into a real friendship for Nicholas and a love for Kate” [‘The Development of Smike’, *Dickensian*, 62 (1966), pp125-128, p126].

appreciation of Nicholas's bodily beauty. Smike's impermissible reaction to Nicholas's body is hereafter mediated through the female figure that Nicholas calls his "pretty sister [. . .] whom you have so often asked me about" (p423). On meeting Kate, Smike immediately transfers his physical investment in Nicholas onto her, to an extent that he cannot bear to witness her courtship by her future husband.

Smike's anticipation of the similar beauty of Nicholas's sister functions as an exact precursor to Steerforth's more sophisticated rhetorical use of the concept of 'sister' in *David Copperfield*:

'You haven't got a sister, have you?' said Steerforth yawning.

'No,' I answered.

'That's a pity,' said Steerforth. 'If you had one, I should think she would have been a pretty, timid, little, bright eyed sort of girl. I should have liked to know her' (p90).

In Steerforth's speculative questioning of David, "a pupil younger than himself who had taken his fancy" (p279), the actual existence of a sister is no longer necessary for homoerotic articulation. As Oliver Buckton has convincingly argued, this scene "suggests that the expression of desire is actually for David himself, no less timid and bright eyed than his imaginary sister, whom Steerforth, using a word inevitably carrying biblical connotations, would like to 'know'."¹²³ David's reciprocal desire for Steerforth is here expressed through his identification with Miss Creakle's permissible love, which allows David to catalogue those aspects of Steerforth that appeal to him most:

I heard that Miss Creakle was regarded by the school in general as being in love with Steerforth; and I am sure as I sat in the dark, thinking of his nice voice, his fine face, and his easy manner, and his curling hair, I thought it very likely (p89).

David's observation of the pair focuses on details of Steerforth's appearance and reiterates his sense of a parity of "romantic feelings" (p291) for the older boy that he shares with Miss Creakle: "When Steerforth, in white trousers, carried her parasol for her, I felt proud

¹²³ Oliver Buckton, "The Reader Whom I Love": Homoerotic Secrets in *David Copperfield*, *ELH*, 64.1 (1997), pp189-222, p202. For briefer analysis of this transfer see E. Pearlman 'David Copperfield Dreams of Drowning', *American Imago*, 28.4 (1971), pp391-403. Pearlman uses the implicit body doubling to answer the question "What exactly does Steerforth find attractive in Em'ly? Steerforth is more interested in David than he admits, and of all the daisies in the field he chooses a girl most like David – his 'sister'" (p402).

to know him; and believed that she could not choose but adore him with all her heart” (p93).¹²⁴ Steerforth’s rhetorical use of David’s non-existent sister enables a similar acknowledgement of his appreciation of his friend’s body. By suggesting that he would “like to know” the body double of David, Steerforth envisages a physical union of the two men that is not finally displaced by the intervention of a sanctioning female. Indeed, in her speculation on the identity of the “pretty woman” Steerforth refers to, Miss Mowcher (the figure Dickens originally intended to use as a procuress) intuitively his attraction to an approximation of David: “A sister of yours, Mr Copperfield?” (p312).

Such a union is restricted to the bounds of male fantasy. It receives only a symbolic enactment in the seduction of Little Em’ly, whom Steerforth selects “as his desired object precisely because she, as David’s figurative sister, *resembles* the primary object of desire that is prohibited as an erotic choice.”¹²⁵ The efficacy of substituting Em’ly for David is demonstrated when David, through his quasi-familial relationship to the Peggottys, is asked to read out Em’ly’s letter of departure. In this ‘performance’ David ventriloquises seduction by Steerforth, narrating the shame and hope of this outlawed liaison through a first person voice that suggests Steerforth’s magnetic attraction to both Em’ly and David (p419).

Such physical transposition is further explored in the parallel manoeuvre by which David finds himself attracted to Steerforth’s foster sister. In the published chapter of his thesis J. M. Léger convincingly argues that David’s attraction to Rosa follows a Girardian pattern:

It is of no little significance that David should feel himself ‘falling a little in love with her’ after spending the day talking about the man they *both* love [. . .] His momentary choice of beloved occurs because he has first chosen the rival for that beloved, the man who has already loved her.¹²⁶

This Sedgwickian reading again privileges rivalry, obscuring the importance of Rosa’s familial relation to Steerforth.¹²⁷ Though Rosa Dartle bears no physical similarity to

¹²⁴ Throughout the novel David makes numerous hyperbolic expressions of his appreciation of Steerforth’s “handsome face and figure” and “so graceful, so natural, so agreeable” manner (p105, p291, see also, for example, p83, p139), emphasising the “power of attraction” or “kind of enchantment” (p105) of the friend he describes as “so irresistible” (p279) and “engaging” (p121).

¹²⁵ Buckton, p209.

¹²⁶ J. M. Léger, ‘Triangulation and Homoeroticism in *David Copperfield*’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 23 (1995), pp301-325, p313.

Steerforth she bears a scar of their relationship, the imprint of what Steerforth admits was a deliberately inflicted wound: “I was a young boy, and she exasperated me, and I threw a hammer at her [. . .] She has borne the mark ever since, as you see” (p278). David is fascinated by this mark of Steerforth on Rosa’s body, describing it as “a remarkable scar” and “glancing at the scar with painful interest” (pp277-278). Just as Steerforth has longed for a girl with David’s physical features as a socially acceptable object of desire, David is eager to examine physical traces of Steerforth on the female body, a site where such “painful interest” and scrutiny becomes legitimised.

In these depictions of anticipated desire, Dickens’s novels reflect those contemporary real-life accounts in which love for a friend’s sister is so sudden as to seem pre-determined. The ‘immediacy’ of Hallam’s and Collinson’s love is paralleled in Dickens’s scenarios of body doubling sisters who need only be glimpsed (Ruth Pinch, Lizzie Hexam) or imagined to be adored. In Smike’s and Steerforth’s anticipatory fantasies of their friend’s sister, the desperate need for such an object of transference is expressed. Without meeting Kate Nickleby, Smike can be certain that “she must be *very* beautiful”, an assumption based entirely on the pattern of Nicholas’s body which he has so closely observed. Similarly, Steerforth’s conviction that David’s sister would be “a pretty, timid, little, bright eyed sort of girl”, is based on the same fantasy of finding all the physical delights of the male friend repeated in a body which can be permissibly desired. By circumventing the need for an actual sister in such articulations, Dickens’s fiction focuses attention on the male body, exposing the extent to which such transposition is a convenient device.

Dickens “the Forerunner”: Sibling Substitution as Homosexual Device

Dickens’s account of schoolboy sexuality in *David Copperfield* surely influenced Thomas Hughes’s employment of a female body double to enable barely mediated same-sex

¹²⁷ Léger’s reading for rivalrous triangulations does yield much suggestive material. He re-plots this particular triangle, to situate David and Rosa as rivals *for* Steerforth: “Dartle is a jealous rival of David’s and reveals the rekindling of her love for Steerforth [. . .] *because* of the value placed upon him by his other lover – David” (p314). Pearlman provides a similarly redolent reading of the erotic effects of male rivalry in the novel: “David and Steerforth share adolescent crushes on each other. Later the two share love objects. Dickens flirts with this classic homosexual theme, but does not take it very far. Little Em’ly is loved by both, and so, in a less obvious way is Rosa Dartle” (p400). Given that Pearlman also observes that Steerforth selects Em’ly as “a girl most like David” one wonders how much further he wishes Dickens to take this highly explicit delineation of same-sex desire.

expression of physical admiration in *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857). Hughes, like many of his contemporaries, was an avid if not always complimentary reader of Dickens's work. Importantly, he specifically questioned the gender implications of Dickens's fiction, recording doubts of whether "Mr Pickwick was *man* enough for what I fancy the staple of the Adirondack Club."¹²⁸ Hughes's biographers point to his debt to *David Copperfield* as a source for the "new literary genre" of the school story. They position Dickens's novel as one of the very few examples of a school setting available to Hughes, in a form traditionally less concerned with the experiences of childhood.¹²⁹ The two novels overlap closely in their parallel representations of schoolboy relationships between an older, protective male and his younger more delicate and explicitly effeminate charge. Like Steerforth calling David "Daisy", Tom Brown gives his young friend a variety of affectionate nicknames including "young un" and "Geordie". Both younger boys respond with respectful use of their friends' surname; David habitually, even in adulthood, refers to 'Steerforth' rather than James, and Tom has to urge Arthur to use his first name: "Why don't you call me Tom? Lots of boys do that I don't like half so much as you."¹³⁰

Steerforth's longing for David's imaginary physically similar sister is closely paralleled by Tom Brown's instant attraction to his friend's mother:

This was Arthur's mother: tall and slight and fair, with masses of golden Hair drawn back from the broad white forehead, and the calm blue eye meeting his so deep and open – the eye that he knew so well, for it was his friend's over again, and the lovely tender mouth that trembled while he looked. She stood there a woman of thirty-eight, old enough to be his mother, – but he thought he had never seen anything so beautiful.¹³¹

As the doubling of eyes clarifies, Mrs Arthur's appeal is firmly based on her close resemblance to her son, who is characterised by pale skin and fair hair. Tom's desire for this cultural figure of purity is clearly represented as taboo – "Where are your manners?

¹²⁸ Quoted by E. Hack and W. Armytage, *Thomas Hughes: The Life of the Author of Tom Brown's Schooldays* (London: Ernest Benn, 1952), p174. Hughes is referring to a contemporary gentleman's club, whose recounted exploits confessedly made his "mouth water."

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p91. Hughes first met Dickens at the Ainsworth's home in January 1844, and described him as "in wild spirits" (p37).

¹³⁰ Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), p237.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pp320-321.

You'll stare my mother out of countenance."¹³² Like Steerforth's seduction of David's representative, Little Em'ly, Tom's initial selection of a socially unacceptable repository for his homoerotic desire signals the wider impermissibility of his sexual wishes. To bring it into tolerable limits, Tom's desire must be expressed through two removes: "He *couldn't help* wondering if Arthur's sisters were like her."¹³³ Despite the double mediation in this mapping onto the safer site of sister (from Arthur to one bodily representative, his mother – to an alternative body double, his sister), the impetus is still clearly Arthur *himself*. The allusion here to the unavoidable compulsion of such relocation, suggests that the sister figure again facilitates the release of previously repressed emotion.

The influential, explicit examples of homoerotic sibling transference provided in Dickens's early career, predate all other instances that have received critical attention. Sanders's conclusion that "in texts where there is a suggestion of homosexual attraction, the sister provides a more acceptable object for the men's homoerotic feelings" is based on later nineteenth- and twentieth-century examples.¹³⁴ Sanders's earliest example is M. E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), a text around which (although Sanders seems oblivious of this) such interpretations have clustered. In this novel, Robert Audley resolves his intense attachment to fellow Etonian and "most intimate friend" George Talboys, through marriage to George's sister, Clara – who in looks and demeanour he finds "so like the friend whom he had loved and lost."¹³⁵ Ann Cvetkovich and Richard Nemesvari have each offered influential readings of Braddon's use of sibling body doubles to mediate Robert Audley's same-sex desire. Cvetkovich argues that Clara's ability to stand-in for her brother "conveniently resolves the problem of homoerotic love; he [Robert Audley] can have the woman who looks like George and who herself transfers onto him her love for her brother, the only man she has loved."¹³⁶ Nemesvari offers a sustained exploration of this

¹³² Ibid., p321.

¹³³ Ibid., emphasis added.

¹³⁴ Sanders, p133.

¹³⁵ Mary Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (London: Penguin, 1998), p95, p203. R. S. Fone Byrne finds an American example from a similar time in Bayard Taylor's 1869 novel *Joseph and His Friend*. Byrne argues that this text "presents itself as a novel of heterosexual life, but possesses a text full of homosexual implication" ["'This Other Eden': Arcadia and the Homosexual Imagination" in *Literary Visions of Homosexuality*, ed. by Stuart Kellog (New York: Haworth Press, 1983), pp13-34, p17]. Such implication is rife in the exploration of the hero's "loveless first marriage and his eventual happiness in a second (with, it ought to be noted, the look-alike sister of his friend Philip)" (p17).

¹³⁶ Ann Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture and Victorian Sensationalism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1992), p64.

aspect of the novel, concluding that through the “text’s declaration that Clara is exactly like her brother [. . .] Clara provides Robert with the perfect object of transference and offers him the opportunity to turn his ‘illicit’ homosocial desire for George in a socially acceptable direction.”¹³⁷ Such readings have become integral to many more recent approaches to the novel, which take up and reinforce the thesis that Robert’s ‘desire’ for Clara is a technique through which his attraction to George is avowed.¹³⁸

Braddon’s employment of sibling transference as practical homoerotic strategy, which is so readily recognised in approaches to *Lady Audley’s Secret*, has a direct precedent in Dickens’s previous equally explicit cross-textual uses of the technique. Braddon was strongly influenced by Dickens, and in her early career received advice from her printer to deliberately imitate the “human interest” created by Dickens’s fiction.¹³⁹ Significantly, Braddon had a particularly strong response to *Nicholas Nickleby*, describing it as “so bright and vivid” and recounting that after she had read her copy “there was not a dry page.”¹⁴⁰ Smike’s transference of desire from Nicholas to the almost identical body of Kate in this novel, provides an exact, but previously unacknowledged, template for Braddon’s famous representation of a homoerotic relationship in *Lady Audley’s Secret*.

Dickens’s homoerotic model of sibling body doubles not only informed the Victorian instance that now receives repeated exploration, it also anticipated the use of this strategy in explicit representations of homosexuality. By the end of the nineteenth century, the device of sibling mapping had become characteristic of those pioneering British novels that first attempted to treat homosexuality with candour, such as E. M. Forster’s *Maurice* (1971). Forster’s novel – written in 1913-14 but carefully suppressed until the year after his death –

¹³⁷ Richard Nemesvari, ‘Robert Audley’s Secret: Male Homosocial Desire in *Lady Audley’s Secret*’, *Studies in the Novel*, 27.4 (1995), pp515-528, p524.

¹³⁸ For an example of the great extent to which this thesis has been critically internalised see Kushnier, ‘Educating Boys to Be Queer’. For earlier renditions of this approach see Gail Turley Houston ‘Mary Braddon’s Commentaries on the Trials and Legal Secrets of Audley Court’ in *Beyond Sensation*, ed. by Marlene Tromp, Pamela K. Gilbert and Aeron Haynie (New York: State U of New York P, 2000), pp17-30, esp. pp27-29; and Hart, ‘The Victorian Villainess’: “Clara appears as a *dues ex machina* to rescue endangered heterosexuality in much the same way that Shakespeare pulls Sebastian out of the hat to replace Viola as Olivia’s husband in *Twelfth Night*. Clara is nothing more than a patent copy of her brother [. . .] Clara occupies the classic position of exchange object as copy” (p8).

¹³⁹ Jennifer Carnell, *The Literary Lives of Mary Elizabeth Braddon* (Hastings: The Sensation Press, 2000), p202.

¹⁴⁰ M. E. Braddon, *Before the Knowledge of Evil* (unpublished typescript in the Robert Lee Wolff collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, The University of Texas at Austin, c1914), p171. Quoted by Carnell, p88.

uses the physical similarity of brother and sister to explore the multiplicity of desire. Durham, who has had an explicitly homoerotic (although deliberately not homosexual) relationship with the eponymous Maurice, wishes for marriage and conformity. Unable to cope with a social climate of shame and secrecy, Durham decides that “he and his friend would arrange something that should include women.”¹⁴¹ Whilst such a triangulation is anathema to the homosexually committed Maurice, Durham’s ‘transition’, is enabled by Maurice’s sister, Ada, who has “Maurice’s voice, his nose, [. . .] the mouth too, and his good spirits and good health.” In Ada, Durham “saw features that he knew, with a light behind that glorified them. He turned away from the dark hair and eyes to the unshadowed mouth or to the curves of the body, and found in her the exact need of his transition. He had seen more seductive women, but none that promised such peace.”¹⁴² Forster’s long suppression of *Maurice* evinces the personal and legal difficulties of speaking of homosexuality in an age of prohibition. Poignantly, Forster perceived the novel’s “keynote” of happiness as a particular obstacle to publication, as “the lovers get away unpunished and consequently recommend crime.”¹⁴³

At the end of the nineteenth century Edward Clarke battled with the same restrictions that Forster faced, using sibling transference to enable an unusually frank treatment of same-sex desire. In *Jaspar Tristram* (1899) Clarke acknowledges the Dickensian tradition of sibling mapping, setting the initial homoerotics in the distinctly Copperfieldian atmosphere of the school-boy bedroom. The protagonist, dubbed Rosy, adopts the role of Scheherazade, telling stories into the night to attract the attention of his beloved Els. Brian Reade describes the explicit homoeroticism of this novel as “an exception” in the “dangerous

¹⁴¹ E. M. Forster, *Maurice* (London: Edward Arnold, 1971), p111.

¹⁴² Ibid., p113-114.

¹⁴³ Ibid., ‘Terminal Note’, p236. Iris Murdoch’s modification of a model of ‘identical’ twins in her 1958 novel *The Bell* suggests a gradual rejection of sibling transference as homosexual solution in an era beginning to permit less coded expressions of same-sex desire. In this novel Murdoch relates the disgust of a lover of a male twin when he meets the female counterpart. The protagonist, Michael, is “confronted by the head of Nick set on the body of Catherine” [*The Bell* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), p109]. In this encounter Murdoch emphatically critiques an earlier model of homosexual body substitution: “It might be thought that since Nature by addition had defeated him of Nick, at least by subtraction it was now offering him Catherine: but this did not occur to Michael except abstractly and as something someone else might have felt” (pp110-111). Indeed he is repulsed by the possibility of transference: “Michael felt that he was the victim of some appalling conjuring trick. He found her, as he found all women, unattractive and a trifle obscene, and the more so for cunningly reminding him of Nick” (p111). Whilst at a time of (slowly) increasing tolerance, Murdoch can discard the technique of ostensible desire transference, her use of sibling body doubling coheres with the Dickensian tradition in that these similar bodies remain an important device in articulating the strength of physical homosexual attraction.

period” of homosexual suppression that followed the Wilde trials.¹⁴⁴ Whilst Reade sees such candour as evidence that “majority prejudices may not be quite so formidable as they seem”, the vehicle of sibling sameness for Clarke’s most explicit expressions of same-sex attraction, attests rather to the power of this transference motif to render safe otherwise risky presentations of homoerotic attachment:

It was always of her brother that she reminded him [. . .] For though not nearly so good-looking, she had yet the same broken eyebrows which in him he had been so fond of and the same laughing eyes; even the few tiny freckles which Els had had and which had exercised upon him *such a curious charm*, were now reproduced in her and with the same effect (emphasis added).¹⁴⁵

As the phrase “such a curious charm” suggests, Clarke exploits the moment of Jaspar’s desire transference from Els to his sister, to offer a more explicit explanation of the outlawed eroticism of this former attachment. Once the threat of homosexuality is diffused in the substitution of the female body this original male/male desire can be safely clarified: “[Her] face [. . .] was so troublingly like that of the boy to whom, a boy, he had been devoted.”¹⁴⁶

In *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), Evelyn Waugh employs the same strategy to explore Charles’s relationship with his beloved friend Sebastian Flyte, whom he describes as “the most conspicuous man of his year, by reason of his beauty.”¹⁴⁷ Sebastian’s decline explicitly precipitates Charles’s transference of desire onto his friend’s sister Julia, to whom he repeatedly explains that Sebastian “was the forerunner”:¹⁴⁸

On my side the interest was keener, for there was always the physical likeness between brother and sister, which [. . .] each time pierced me anew; and, as Sebastian in his sharp decline seemed daily to fade and crumble, so much the more did Julia stand out clear and firm.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ Brian Reade, (ed.), *Sexual Heretics: Male Homosexuality in English Literature from 1850-1900* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p53.

¹⁴⁵ Edward Clarke, *Jaspar Tristram* (London: Heinemann, 1899), p216.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p217.

¹⁴⁷ Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* (London: Penguin, 1970), p30.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, see for example p245.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p172.

In the character of Anthony Blanche, Waugh's novel offers an explicit representation of male homosexuality, against which the nuances of male/male desire between Charles and Sebastian are explored. This much later example from an author whose wider influence by Dickens is well known, suggests the continuing legacy of Dickens's establishment of specific motifs for exploration of the homoerotic. Furthermore, the proliferation of the motif of homoerotic sibling transference in those novels that explicitly seek to explore the diversity of desire between men, clearly evinces the incongruity between Dickens's recurrent use of such a homoerotically enabling device and the continued conception of him as "the most central of Victorian authors."¹⁵⁰

The wider employment of this motif, particularly by those authors whose particular debt to Dickens's work can be identified, is evidence that through cross-textual reiteration Dickens did produce readers competent in apprehending and recognising the homoerotic hermeneutic of in-law triangles. Those readers who became writers attest to the continued potency of Dickens's pioneering model for expressing same-sex desire.

¹⁵⁰ John Schad, (ed.), *Dickens Refigured: Bodies, Desires and Other Histories* (Manchester and New York, Manchester UP, 1996), p1.

Chapter Four

Homotropics: Exotic Strategies of Illicit Representation

Dickens's fiction abounds with figures who emigrate and characters who participate in extended overseas travel, and there has recently been a belated critical recognition of the pertinence of the logistics of travel, emigration and colonisation in Dickens's writing. By combining current theories of queer diaspora with Dickens's use of travel to create a space for imaginative potential and the experience of something beyond the constraints of 'home', the freight of what have previously been viewed as random, unconnected relocations can be unpacked to reveal a distinctly homoerotic trajectory. This chapter colonises this liminal area of Dickens study through a consideration of the erotically connotative locations at which specific characters cluster. In examining the significance of these sites, the chapter works towards a historically and geographically nuanced understanding of the premise advanced by Karl Miller that for many individuals in the nineteenth century "national ambivalence and sexual ambivalence were one and the same: the change of country [. . .] was caused or conditioned by a search for the exotic partner, for a love that was domestically unspeakable."¹ The competing senses of the terms 'domestic' and 'home' are interrogated as part of an exploration of the foreign alternative available to those whose desires could not be accommodated by the conventional familial ideology of mandatory marriage within what was experienced as the doubly domestic homeland of Victorian Britain. Just as Dickens manipulates the construction of the traditional family, to make space within it for the homoerotic bond of in-lawing, the movement overseas signals less a rejection of the domestic than a negotiation of alternative constructions of domesticity.

Dickens's career-long exploration of the homoerotic opportunities of overseas sites anticipates both the proliferation of homoerotic quest narratives later in the century and the actual search for homotropics by gay men and women that has been critically positioned as a fin-de-siècle phenomenon. This chapter, however, identifies a variety of earlier instances of actual sexual migration and homotropical fiction that Dickens was familiar with. Dickens utilises the existing (homo)erotic connotations attributed to specific locations

¹ Karl Miller, *Doubles: Studies in Literary History* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985), p221.

during his career, drawing particularly upon a wider cultural reading of Byron as queer traveller, and an increasing contemporary appreciation of the erotic variety of the *Arabian Nights*.

Whilst departing and returning emigrants and travellers feature in almost all of Dickens's novels, critics have traditionally been reluctant to focus on the 'foreign' elements of Dickens's work. As recently as 1990, Andrew Sanders reiterated the limiting position that "the world beyond western Europe and North America figures only minimally in his work."² The cross-textual significance of characters' relocations has hitherto either been dismissed as a convenient plot resolution device or occluded as part of a wider reluctance to reiterate or draw attention to Dickens's undeniable, if complicated, racial prejudice.³ Grace Moore's recent work on *Dickens and Empire* functions as an important corrective to the longstanding lack of attention to the functioning of the foreign in Dickens. Without seeking to elide the viciousness of Dickens's racism in famous journalistic pieces such as 'The Noble Savage', Moore carefully positions such outbursts within Dickens's biography and a wider contemporary framework to offer a more nuanced understanding of Dickens's often ambivalent attitudes towards race.⁴

The traditional lack of critical emphasis on the significance of other countries in Dickens's fiction is at odds with a widespread appreciation of the importance of travel and new locales to his imaginative world. Nicola Bradbury has recently pointed to the dual connotations of a geographical move away from the domestic in Dickens's writing:

The word 'abroad' has two potential inflections: overseas, foreign, alien; or at large, free. Dickens explores both of these areas of meaning, and

² Andrew Sanders, 'The Dickens World' in *Creditable Warriors 1850-1876*, ed. by Michael Cotsell (London: Ashfield, 1990), pp131-142, p133.

³ This critical discomfort relates to those insidious canonical value judgements through which, as Edward Said argues, "writers' ideas about colonial expansion, inferior races, or 'niggers' [are relegated] to a very different department to that of culture, culture being the elevated area of activity in which they 'truly' belong and in which they did their 'really' important work" [*Culture and Imperialism*, 4th edn (London: Vintage, 1994), pxiv].

⁴ In *Dickens and Empire: Discourses of Class Race and Colonialism in the Works of Charles Dickens* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) Moore "does not seek to exonerate Dickens from charges of racism, but rather to examine his changing imaginative engagement with the empire and his complex attitude toward the racial other" (p5). See also Grace Moore, 'Reappraising Dickens's "Noble Savage"', *Dickensian*, 98.3 (2002), pp236-244. Moore demonstrates that the critical dismissal of this piece "as a mere testimony of Dickens's growing racism in this period" leads to widespread understatement of Dickens's more positive contributions to debates on race, including his continued commitment to the abolitionist cause (p236).

also how they might intersect.⁵

Bradbury, in line with existing approaches to Dickens's travel writing, focuses on the imaginative potential of journeys which permit "psychological and even philosophical exploration."⁶ As John Drew has put it "the effects of motion on the mental processes, and the fundamental similarity between physical displacement or trajectory and wanderings of flights of the imagination seem to be concepts underlying many of Dickens's sketches and essays about travelling and travellers."⁷ Various commentators have observed Dickens's metaphoric use of foreign locales to offer comment on domestic reform.⁸ However, this emphasis tends to obscure Dickens's literary investment in specific overseas sites as providing a space for alterity from the values of 'home'. A distilled revelation of this strategy is available in Dickens's most readily recognised travel fiction, *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The sojourn of the younger Martin and his faithful servant Mark Tapley in America (which becomes the setting for a highly physicalised male intimacy, discussed in chapter five) is prefaced by an explicit reference to emigration as an alternative to conventional domesticity in the history of Mr Todgers, "who, it seemed, had cut his matrimonial career rather short, by unlawfully running away from his happiness, and establishing himself in foreign countries as a bachelor" (p134).⁹ This figuring of Todgers's pleasure-tripping as both transgressive and (sexually) liberating adds extra support to Sanders's suggestive claim for the underlying yearning for "something beyond" expressed in Dickens's preoccupation with travel narratives as both writer and reader.¹⁰

⁵ Nicola Bradbury, 'Dickens and James: "Watching with my Eyes Closed": The Dream Abroad', *Dickens Quarterly*, 17.2 (2000), pp77-87, p77.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p81.

⁷ John Drew, 'Voyages Extraordinaires: Dickens's "Travelling Essays" and *The Uncommercial Traveller*' (part one of two), *Dickens Quarterly*, 13.2 (1996), pp76-96, p87.

⁸ See especially Drew, and Anthony Chennells, 'Savages and Settlers in Dickens: Reading Multiple Centres' in *Dickens and the Children of Empire*, ed. by Wendy Jacobson (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), pp153-172.

⁹ Todgers's overseas excesses set a pattern for Dickens's errant husbands. After Miss Betsy Trotwood pays off her abusive husband, "and effect[s] a separation by mutual consent", he emigrates: "He went to India with his capital, and there, according to a wild legend in our family he was once seen riding an elephant, in company with a Baboon; but I think it must have been a Baboo – or a Begum" (*David Copperfield*, p13). Maritally separated Mr Sparsit in *Hard Times* also opts for emigration, relocating to France where he dies of excessive alcohol consumption.

¹⁰ Sanders, p133. Todgers's libidinal excesses are implied in his phallic name. It is not unlikely that Dickens was drawing upon crude Yorkshire dialect slang (revived, as the *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Contemporary Slang* would have it, "by students, alternative comedians, etc., in the 1980s") given his penchant for penis punning in this novel, which is often observed in relation to Tom Pinch's delighted manipulation of his "simple little organ" (p461). Chase and Levenson suggest that in innuendos on Tom's instrument "Dickens plays (shamelessly) on the sexual pun" (p93). For further examination of Tom's organ see Michael Steig, 'The Intentional Phallus: Determining Verbal Meaning in Literature', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 36 (1977), pp51-61.

Dickens's own obsession with travel literature from boyhood has been well documented. He repeatedly records the fascinating appeal of such writings through a range of partially biographical personae. David Copperfield's reflection on his "greedy relish for a few volumes of Voyages and Travels" (p60) is echoed in journalistic pieces:

Such books have had a strong fascination for my mind from my earliest childhood; and I wonder it should have come to pass that I have never been round the world, never have been shipwrecked, ice environed, tomahawked or eaten.¹¹

The longevity of this "ardent interest in voyagers and travellers" also informs Dickens's journalism: "We have outgrown no story of voyage and travel."¹² This compulsively reiterated interest receives plenty of supporting evidence; John Forster's recollection of Dickens spending the summer of 1848 reading "a surprising number of books of African and other travel for which he had an insatiable relish" is borne out by catalogues of Dickens's library.¹³ Drew offers a detailed record of the numerous volumes of travel literature in the Sotheran's sale catalogue, concluding that such material accounts "for the largest section of books of one particular description purposefully acquired by Dickens during his lifetime."¹⁴ When George Henry Lewes visited Dickens in 1838, he was somewhat underwhelmed by the young author's library of "nothing but three-volume novels and books of travel."¹⁵ Whilst Lewes finds the collection shockingly unstudious, his observation that "a man's library expresses much of his hidden life" gestures suggestively toward the covert release valve that Dickens was to find in both reading and writing of "something beyond" domestic shores.¹⁶

Both literary critics and social historians have most readily detected the (homo)sexual element of this "something beyond" at the close of the nineteenth century. Robert Aldrich, for instance, examines the lives of (most often late) Victorian colonial explorers who

¹¹ Charles Dickens, 'The Long Voyage', *Household Words*, 31 December 1853, rpt. in *Dickens' Journalism*, III (1998), p181.

¹² Charles Dickens, 'Where We Stopped Growing', *Household Words*, 1 January 1853, quoted by Drew, p76.

¹³ Quoted in *Dickens' Journalism*, III, p180.

¹⁴ Drew, p77.

¹⁵ George Henry Lewes, 'Dickens in Relation to Criticism' (1872), quoted by Leon Litvack, 'What Books Did Dickens Buy and Read? Evidence from the Book Accounts with his Publishers', *Dickensian*, 94.2 (1998), pp85-130, p85.

¹⁶ Ibid.

“channelled energies into expeditions and homoerotic friendships rather than ‘normal’ married life [. . .] prefer[ring] the camaraderie of male assistants to the pleasures of a wife.”¹⁷ More broadly Aldrich considers the potential for same-sex relationships in what was often (almost) exclusively a male environment at the imperial ‘frontier’:

The gendered nature of expansion, in which men monopolised many imperial activities, and where manly virtues were championed, created situations congenial to intimate male bonding.¹⁸

As John Tosh puts it, the empire in the period 1870-1900, was a major site of the male “flight from domesticity”: “The empire was run by bachelors; in the public mind it represented devotion to duty or profit (and sometimes pleasure), undistracted by feminine ties.” Thus “empire was actively embraced by young men as a *means* of evading or postponing the claims of domesticity.”¹⁹

Historical and literary perspectives come together in periodising the fin de siècle as the moment when the ‘the wilderness’ became a site of freedom from compulsory heterosexuality for both real and fictive colonists. Elaine Showalter, for example, positions the “revival of [male quest] ‘romance’ in the 1880s”, investigating the questers’ desire “to evade heterosexuality altogether” in novels by Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad.²⁰ Whilst Aldrich cites many earlier nineteenth-century examples of the cultural association of particular locations with same-sex practice, he follows the pervasive critical assumption that such a linkage became most visible at the turn of the century:

By the late nineteenth-century, a widespread belief circulated in Europe that homosexuality (and other sexual deviance) was endemic in the non-European world. The perception, and (to a limited extent) the reality, of the empire as a homosexual playground must not be underestimated. Homosexual men fleeing legal persecution in Britain, Germany and the Netherlands (and cultural disapprobation if not persecution in France) often

¹⁷ Robert Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p3.

¹⁹ John Tosh, *A Man’s Place*, p175, p177.

²⁰ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, 1992), p82. Joseph Boone’s survey of protagonists “existing outside the boundaries of matrimonial definition or familial expectation” in American quest romance similarly clusters around the end of the nineteenth century, although he also includes Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851), demonstrating the fruitfulness of this approach when applied to earlier texts (*Tradition Counter Tradition*, p226).

found a warm welcome in the colonies.²¹

The critical positioning of this alleged peak in the cultural association of the exotic with the ('perverse') erotic at the fin de siècle, despite a wealth of earlier instances, is intimately related to the travels of particularly colourful individuals. Aldrich, for example, focuses on late nineteenth- and twentieth-century travellers such as André Gide (1869-1951), in whom he finds "the key French example of homosexual colonial experience", and Jean Genet (1910-1986).²² Miller also firmly ties his exploration of the duality of expatriation to "the late Victorian [. . .] writers who knew what it was to reach decisions, or to experience difficulties, in the matter of the country to which they took themselves to belong, or in which they wished to settle: Stevenson, Sharp, Henry James, Wharton, Conrad, Wilde, Yeats, Frost and then Eliot."²³ The apparent increase in such sexually motivated travel is critically linked to the discursive formation of the homosexual:

It is no coincidence that the decade that saw the creation of the pathological category of the homosexual intensified the search for non-European outlets, such as Algeria, for sexual energies increasingly persecuted within Western culture.²⁴

The notoriety of these later queer pilgrimages is intensified by the uneven critical attention bestowed on those instances of homosexuality that appear at the time when it was so constituted.

Miller acknowledges that the association of expatriation with a queer turn away from conventional family life "is evident at earlier points in the history of this literature." However, the consideration of a longer tradition of queer diaspora is quickly stifled by an insistence that "in the Nineties the tendency came to a head."²⁵ The academic emphasis on both literary male romance questers and famous homosexual travellers from the turn of the century tends to obscure what is often surprisingly explicit earlier material, such as "textual

²¹ Aldrich, *Colonialism*, p5.

²² Ibid., p331. Jonathan Dollimore takes a similar focus in his survey of *Sexual Dissidence*, arguing that "Gide's experience in Africa is one of the most significant modern narratives of homosexual liberation" [*Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), p12].

²³ Miller, p221. Similarly, Boone allows his prehistory of the homoeroticising of North Africa to be eclipsed by what he reverently describes as the "legend" of Gide, Oscar Wilde, Alfred Douglas and E. M. Forster ['Vacation Cruises: or the Homoerotics of Orientalism', *PMLA*, 110.1 (1995), pp89-107].

²⁴ Boone, 'Vacation Cruises', p105.

²⁵ Miller, p225.

evidence of a fascination with the Near East's rumoured homoeroticism scattered through commentaries that reach back to the time of the crusades."²⁶ Ian Littlewood more successfully combines recognition of the conceptual dominance of these late nineteenth-century figures (and of what was described at the time as a mass exodus from Britain following Wilde's arrest) with a thorough exploration of the earlier homotropics integral to the diverse erotic opportunities of the Grand Tour (a declining tradition by the nineteenth century) and in the legacy of previous sexual explorers such as Byron.²⁷ Despite the much more heavily documented sexing-up of foreign travel at the close of the nineteenth century, Littlewood demonstrates that an association of travel with a revolt from domestic, especially sexual, constraints was firmly established by the period of Dickens's career.

Early Eroticised Terrain: The East and West Indies

From Dickens's first novel, a suggestive link is forged between same-sex desire and emigration. As discussed briefly in the second chapter, *The Pickwick Papers* features two highly intimate male couples who are relocated at the novel's close to colonial outposts. Pickwick aids Jingle – and Job at his own request – to emigrate to Demerara, a region of Guyana in the West Indies. Job insists that “he must go along with the other one”, giving up a remunerative clerkship (“eighteen bob a-week and a rise if he behaves himself”) in London for “something on the same estate; not near so good, Perker says, as a convict would get in New South Wales, if he appeared at his trial in a new suit of clothes” (p711). In this reference to the involuntary deportation of convicted felons, the impoverished pair – who have been released from the Fleet debtors' prison by Pickwick's benevolence – become associated with transportable criminality.

During the period of Dickens's career, emigration was increasingly discussed as a possible solution to the perceived problem of working-class overpopulation. It was advanced as a resolution to problems posed by poverty itself, as a means of expelling unemployed and dissident workers from the domestic economy, reducing home political tensions under the soothing ideology of ‘civilising’ colonised peoples through an increased British presence

²⁶ Boone, ‘Vacation Cruises’, p92.

²⁷ Ian Littlewood, *Sultry Climates: Travel and Sex* (London: Murray, 2001), p131, p107.

abroad.²⁸ Dickens sympathised with Caroline Chisholm's promotion of emigration as a relief to domestic poverty, advocating this cause in the first issue of the weekly periodical that Dickens was to conduct from 1850-9, *Household Words*. In their preface to the co-authored article, 'A Bundle of Emigrant's Letters', Dickens and Chisholm position the alleviation of severe hardship as the primary design of Chisholm's Family Colonization Loan Society: "It is melancholy to reflect that thousands of British subjects should wander about, more like spectres than beings of flesh and blood; and that hundreds should die from starvation, while our vast colonies could provide abundantly for them."²⁹ Ken Lewandosi makes a convincing argument for the slippage in the mid nineteenth century "between the object of transportation and the object of emigration – the convict and the poor – a slippage that helped sustain the earlier ideology of projecting the socially dangerous as far out of the light as possible."³⁰ He argues that articles in *Household Words* "reveal a remarkable consistency in promoting free emigration as a solution to the widespread social ills thought to result from both criminality and poverty."³¹

The emigration of Job and Jingle is not, however, exclusively, or even primarily, associated with criminality or poverty, but with their status as a pair. Whilst they are associated with the eminent emigrant categories of pauper and criminal, discussions about their mutual relocation focus on their relationship as "a worthy couple" (p704). Job's self-sacrificing insistence on remaining with Jingle provokes the most explicit homophobic anxiety of the novel, Lowten's description of Job's selfless attachment as "downright sneaking." As discussed more fully in chapter two, Lowten goes on to detail his perception of the deviancy of this pairing: "no man should have more than two attachments – the first to number one and the second to the ladies" (p701). This phobic reaction, however, is counteracted by an opposing response from the novel's highest moral authority. Pickwick's "glistening eyes" at Job's fidelity to "the only friend he ever had", marks and

²⁸ See entries on 'Emigration and Colonisation' and 'Travel and Exploration' in *Companion*, and Nan Dreher, 'Redundancy and Emigration: The "Woman Question" in Mid-Victorian Britain', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 26.1 (1993), pp4-8.

²⁹ 'A Bundle of Emigrants' Letters', *Household Words*, 30 March 1850, I, p19.

³⁰ Ken Lewandosi, 'A New Transportation for the Penitentiary Era: Some *Household Words* on Free Emigration', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 26.1 (1993), pp8-18, p10.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p8. *The Pickwick Papers* further iterates this conservative association in the inference made through Job's brother, Dismal Jemmy, that voluntary relocation is also related to criminality: "He emigrated to America, Sir, in consequence of being too much sought after here, to be comfortable; and has never been heard of since" (p703).

sanctions an alternative response to what the novel also suggests is a noble attachment (p701):

‘He means to say,’ said Job, advancing a few paces, ‘that if he is not carried off by the fever, he will pay the money back again. If he lives, he will, Mr Pickwick. I will see it done. I know he will, Sir,’ said Job, with great energy, ‘I could undertake to swear it’ (p703).

Pickwick’s emotion at such avowals signals an understandably homophilic reaction, given the emotional and erotic overlaps between Job and Jingle’s relationship and the to-death fidelity of this eponymous bachelor hero and Sam Weller.

The cross-referential intimacies of male pairs in this novel are further developed in the parallel emigration of similarly alliterative “intimate friends” Ben and Bob, who depart under parallel circumstances of bankruptcy, four chapters after Job and Jingle. Before leaving the country Ben and Bob have sought to mediate their relationship domestically thorough in-lawing. When this fails, emigration is offered as an alternative means of negotiating the rigidly heterosexual demands of home:

Mr Bob Sawyer, having previously passed through the Gazette, passed over to Bengal, accompanied by Mr Benjamin Allen, both gentlemen having received appointments to the East India Company. They each had the yellow fever fourteen times, and then resolved to try a little abstinence, since which period they have been doing well (p753).

The shared experience of fever and languages of mutuality – “both”, “each”, “they” – that characterise this short report clearly intensify the association of this male pair with that other inseparable “worthy couple”, Job and Jingle. Thus an alternative reading of emigration is proposed and reinforced, under which what has previously been regarded as a minor imperial detail becomes an important homoerotic signifier.³² In sending those abroad whose attachment is regarded by other characters as suspiciously “soft”, and those who have sought (but failed) to domesticate their intense relationship through

³² The typical critical dismissal of such ‘marginal’ plots is exemplified in F. S. Schwarzbach’s statement that “the impact of the East India company is felt even in such minor details in Dickens’s fiction as sending the scapegrace medical students Bob Sawyer and Ben Allen to be surgeons in India at the end of *Pickwick Papers*” (‘Travel Literature’, *Companion*, p586). Whilst Moore brings a more nuanced approach to Dickens’s complex attitudes to the relationship between domestic reform and emigration, she reiterates the simplistic assumption that “in his early works the Empire was little more than a useful repository to contain a number of social problems” (*Dickens and Empire*, p7).

intermarriage, Dickens's first novel clearly establishes a homoerotic resonance to mutual relocations of male pairs.

In his second novel Dickens strengthens and diversifies this strategy, again deploying the West Indies as a site of perceived freedom from social, specifically sexual, constraints. Paul Sharrad has observed the recurrence of significant, competing and apparently undeveloped references to the Caribbean in *Oliver Twist*.³³ Mrs Bedwin tells Oliver about her son "who was clerk to a merchant in the West Indies, and was also such a good young man, and wrote such dutiful letters home four times a year."³⁴ This is also the location to which Brownlow pursues Edward Leeford, alias Monks (p260), who deploys his estate in the West Indies as a retreat whenever it is necessary "to escape the consequences of vicious courses here" (p413). After Brownlow's settlement, "Monks, still bearing that assumed name, retired with his portion to a distant part of the New World; where having quickly squandered it, he once more fell into his old courses, and, after undergoing a long confinement for some fresh act of fraud and knavery, at length sunk under an attack of his old disorder, and died in prison. As far from home died the chief remaining members of Fagin's gang" (p451). Criminality again links these experiences of voluntary and forced movements overseas.³⁵

On top of these re-sounded connotations the West Indies both inherits and intensifies the association with same-sex desire already established through Job and Jingle in *Pickwick*. In a novel concerned with a wrangle for possession of its principal boy by a variety of male figures who are specifically attracted by the prepossessing physical appearance of Oliver, both the ostensibly benevolent Brownlow and the apparently oppositionally evil Monks are firmly associated with boy loving:

While it is suggestively interesting that Fagin regards Oliver's 'looks' as the boy's chief asset in the criminal world, it is perhaps equally remarkable that his looks should be every bit as much of an asset in the respectable

³³ Paul Sharrad, 'Speaking the Unspeakable: London, Cambridge and the Caribbean', in *De-scribing Empire: Post Colonialism and Textuality*, ed. by Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp201-217.

³⁴ Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (London, Penguin, 2003), p106. All further references are to this edition and are given in parentheses within the text.

³⁵ This reference to the transportation of convicts from Fagin's gang resonates with the deportation of the Dodger and the description of the returned felon Kags, who "arrived sooner than was expected from foreign parts, and is too modest to want to be presented to the Judges on his return" (p367).

world of Mr Brownlow.³⁶

Larry Wolff situates this reading of the widespread male desire physically to appropriate Oliver within a broader exploration of the work performed by Dickens's carefully gendered delineation of criminality in his preface to the third edition (1841). Here Dickens specified Nancy's crime for the first time: "the boys are pick-pockets, and the girl is a prostitute."³⁷ Combining the implied [denial of the] possibility that the boys could also be sold for sex, with Dickens's acknowledged effort to include offensive material only through "unavoidable inference", Wolff demonstrates the "radical indeterminacy of the novel [. . .] following from Dickens's confessed reliance on implication and inference" on the issue of whether the vices of Fagin's boys involve male prostitution.³⁸ Within the novel's economy of "the sexual exploitation of boys" Wolff sees Monks as manifesting "almost explicit homosexuality."³⁹ He focuses on the moment at Monks's lair after the Bumbles' departure: "They were no sooner gone, than Monks, who appeared to entertain an invincible repugnance to being left alone, called to a boy who had been hidden somewhere below" (p317):

The boy's role as companion-on-call, to mitigate the loneliness of Monks with his evil passions, leaves little room for doubt about what must follow in the unnarrated subsequent scene of the chamber.⁴⁰

As a locus for the most explicitly man (and boy) loving men of the first two novels, Dickens deploys the West Indies as homoerotic locale. Clearly – as the mercantile example of Mrs Bedwin's merchant son demonstrates – it would be as reductive to suggest that this is the location's sole significance, as it would be to deny the homoerotic inference built up through select relocations.

³⁶ Larry Wolff, "The Boys are Pickpockets and the Girl is a Prostitute": Gender and Juvenile Criminality in Early Victorian England from *Oliver Twist* to *London Labour*, *New Literary History*, 27.2 (1996), pp227-249, p239. Richard Dellamora examines Cruikshank's illustrative support for Dickens's critique of abusive "male mentorship", observing that the phallic depiction of Oliver is paralleled in scenes with Fagin and Bumble: "He draws an oversized spoon directed at a forty-five degree angle from Oliver's crotch to the open mouth and popping eyes of Bumble." "Cruikshank's plate 'Oliver introduced to the Respectable Old Gentleman is a diptych to 'Oliver asking for More' [. . .] As in the earlier illustration, Oliver carries an [appropriately penile] object at an angle, not a spoon this time but a walking stick" ['Pure Oliver, or Representation without Agency', in *Dickens Refigured*, pp55-79, p58, p68].

³⁷ Charles Dickens, 'The Author's Introduction to the Third Edition' (1841), rpt. Penguin ed., pp456-460, p456.

³⁸ Wolff, pp228-229.

³⁹ Ibid., p242, p241.

⁴⁰ Ibid. Whilst Wolff's speculation on Monks's homosexual proclivities is instructive, he perhaps overstates the case here.

The interrelated significance of Dickens's many migrants has been obscured by a pervasive refusal to accord any real meaning to Dickensian emigration and exile, through the logic that these are novelistic devices for convenient plot resolution. Leon Litvack recites the popular stance that "emigration was a popular way of tying up loose ends at the end of Victorian novels", according instances of this 'technique' so little significance that he erroneously asserts that "apart from [in] *David Copperfield* Dickens avoids this particular tactic."⁴¹ Similarly, Moore's otherwise pioneering focus on overseas locales in Dickens's work suffers from her accordance with this 'convenience' thesis:

[Dickens] seems to have regarded the West Indies in the same way he perceived Australia. The Caribbean was a useful place to exile problematic characters in need of a swift change of fortune such as Walter Gay in *Dombey and Son* – it could also provide a plausible source of wealth/refuge for characters like Monks/Leeford in *Oliver Twist*.⁴²

However, Diana Archibald has demonstrated that the Caribbean had its own distinct significance in a contemporary literature that capitalised "on the image of Latin America as a wild and dangerous land."⁴³ Sharrad offers the only existing attempt to read the specific historical and cultural meanings of the Caribbean in Dickens's writing:

It may be that Dickens deliberately connected Monks with the West Indies to indicate moral degeneracy by association with the slave trade, but it is far more likely that he simply saw the tropics as a natural metonym for physical, mental and moral degeneration as Charlotte Bronte was to do later in the decade with *Jane Eyre*.⁴⁴

Sharrad's exclusive recognition of Monks's relocation results in a negative reading of this site, but clearly, in the parallel movement of Job and Jingle, Dickens also perceived the potential for more homophilic freedoms under what appeared to Victorian authors as an alternative, almost unregulated Caribbean morality. The perceived wildness, particularly sexual wildness (such as that slightly later attributed to Bertha Mason), of the Caribbean as

⁴¹ Leon Litvack, 'Emigration and Colonization', *Companion*, pp221-223, p223.

⁴² Grace Moore, 'Swarmery and Bloodbaths: A Reconsideration of Dickens on Class and Race in the 1860s', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 31 (2002), pp175-202, p177.

⁴³ Diana Archibald, *Domesticity, Imperialism and Emigration in The Victorian Novel* (Missouri: U of Missouri P, 2002), p16. Archibald cites the tempestuous contemporary example of Harriet Martineau's *Demerrera* (1839), in which the hurricane operates as a physical embodiment of the rage of black slaves. A later instance is cited from Wilkie Collins's *Armada* (1866), which opens with a Caribbean murder.

⁴⁴ Sharrad, p209.

well as many other non-European and Mediterranean sites, combined suggestively with a belief in the relaxation of social mores outside of Britain to form spaces for alternative relationships. In the cataloguing of the relocation of mutual male pairs in the final chapter of *The Pickwick Papers*, emigration when used 'to tie up loose ends' has suggestive novelistic overlaps with the dominant concluding strategy of marriage. Refusing to close with the Snodgrass wedding, Dickens offers a listing of the novel's paired and unpaired. The unconventionality of couples such as Bob Sawyer and Ben Allen in Bengal is dramatised through their narrative proximity to "Mr and Mrs Winkle" and "Mr and Mrs Snodgrass" (pp752-753). Immersed within the space conventionally reserved for closing marital narration, this mutual male pairing (like their counterparts Job and Jingle) are implicated in a gay marriage which can be lived outside the boundaries of Britain.

Such queer exile coheres with Dickens's previously acknowledged expatriation of the socially disenfranchised, who cannot be accommodated within a rigidly reproductive society. Focusing on *David Copperfield*, Patricia Plummer argues that "eventually Dickens resorts to a convenient trick by shipping the disorderly elements of fallen women and the non-conformist Micawber family off to Australia."⁴⁵ Plummer's blanket term "disorderly elements" points helpfully to the complex cultural similarities between each exiled group. The element of social disorder unites the otherwise highly various emigrant categories of transportable criminals, paupers (as well as other economic 'liabilities'), and sexual dissidents. Given Dickens's famous promotion of emigration as the 'solution' to prostitution, exile of those manifesting more nameable dissident sexualities (including adulterers and seducers, as well as 'fallen' women and prostitutes) attains a particular prominence in his work.

In *Oliver Twist* Dickens opens the possibility of prostitutes beginning again abroad, although at this early stage of his career Nancy is also offered a domestic alternative: "a quiet asylum, either in England, or, if you fear to remain here, in some foreign country"

⁴⁵ Patricia Plummer, 'From Agnes Fleming to Helena Landless: Dickens, Women and (Post-) Colonialism' in *Dickens, Europe and the New Worlds*, ed. by Anny Sadrin (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp267-282, p275. As Moore notes, Dickens was not averse to employing this technique to purge his own family of its 'disorderly elements': "He frequently exiled troublesome members of his large family to make a new start in the colonies. As Forster wrote of the Dickens family in 1860, 'Charley is in the Far East, Sydney is at sea, Walter in India, Alfred in Australia, whither he is planning to send another boy to join him'" (*Dickens and Empire*, p1).

(p340). By 1847 when Dickens opened Urania Cottage, his 'Home for Homeless Women', his attitude had hardened and the refuge was offered for the indivisible "reclamation and emigration of women." Believing that for such women "there could be little or no hope in this country" Dickens admitted "only those who distinctly accepted this condition: That they came there to be ultimately sent abroad."⁴⁶ Through novelistic figures such as *David Copperfield's* Martha and Little Em'ly who begin new lives in Australia, Dickens promoted this course of action for "fallen women" in his fiction. Anny Sadrin argues that connotations of fall inevitably attach to exiled characters, even when they are otherwise exonerated of sexual misconduct, as with faux-adulteress Edith Dombey:

This confidential revelation of her innocence is unlikely to disperse the whiff of scandal that surrounds her and makes her presence in London undesirable [. . .] Her retreat to Italy is unquestionably a golden exile compared to Martha's or Little Em'ly's (not to mention Alice Marwood's), but it nonetheless contaminates her through associations and gives her the status of a fallen woman.⁴⁷

Emigration in Dickens then, through its dominant associative link with the 'fallen' woman, is most visibly – though not exclusively – a response to 'excess' sexuality that cannot be domestically accommodated.

The association of foreign relocation with what was perceived as anti-social sexuality is strengthened in this period through the widespread familial strategy of sending those whose desires did not fit (often lucrative) marital plans on extended overseas tours. Davidoff and Hall offer a variety of instances of what was a typical deployment of foreign travel as an antidote to sexual disgrace at home, such as the case of "John Howard Galton, the youngest of a Birmingham banking family and the darling of his mother [who] became involved in an affair at the age of twenty-three and was packed off to the continent as rumours circulated of an illegitimate baby born in Ireland. He returned to make a good marriage with the daughter of a leading manufacturer."⁴⁸ In *Pickwick* Dickens makes somewhat ironic use of this trope of familial sexual coercion to 'encourage' marital choice.

⁴⁶ Charles Dickens, 'Home for Homeless Women', *Household Words*, 25 April 1853, rpt. in *Dickens' Journalism*, III, p128.

⁴⁷ Anny Sadrin, 'Why D.I.J.O.N? Crossing Forbidden Boundaries in *Dombey and Son*', in *Dickens, Europe and the New Worlds*, pp14-21, p18.

⁴⁸ Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p523.

Attempting to force his sister's selection of partner into line, literally, with his own, Ben Allen threatens to "take her abroad for a while and see what that'll do" (p512). Arabella manages to resist her brother's choice and without this intermarriage to sanction his relationship with Bob Sawyer the two men opt to relocate. In this they follow a parallel tradition of homosexual emigration and travel, such as that which had already achieved a certain notoriety as practised by figures such as William Beckford and Lord Byron.⁴⁹

Whilst many individuals benefited from a relaxation of censures against same-sex desire when they travelled overseas or emigrated, recent critics have cautioned against any simplistically celebratory reading of the potential freedoms of homotropics.⁵⁰ Jarrod Hayes raises the concern that representations of foreign homosex as playing away may not present any challenge to the compulsory and privileged nature of heterosexuality at home, merely operating as "the escape hatch for activities Western heterosexuality abjects."⁵¹ Diana Archibald makes a similar point about the literary deployment of emigration in the nineteenth century: "Certain British authors often brought their texts to the margins as a way to shore up their own ideological centres."⁵² Shannon Russell argues that this conservative separatist ideology informs exile in Dickens:

Dickens's use of emigration as a narrative solution in *David Copperfield* exposes his adherence to perceptions of the colonies as the place for those who cannot be morally or materially accommodated in the Old World. He sanctions the view that some people should be kept separate.⁵³

⁴⁹ See Louis Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love: Homophobia in Nineteenth Century England* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985), pp118-120 on Beckford's expedient flight to the continent in the late eighteenth century after being accused of sexual relations with another man. Crompton also records how Beckford's home in exile formed a central part of what can be seen as Byron's queer foreign pilgrimage: "It was ironic that Byron, on his first arrival in Europe, should have been immediately reminded of another wealthy and literate bisexual who had been forced to flee abroad" (p130). Aldrich argues that Beckford's "expatriation was not unusual for men of his sexual and cultural inclinations and wealth" [*The Seduction of the Mediterranean* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p70].

⁵⁰ Sedgwick's extremely muted interpretation of positive homoerotic possibilities of foreign locales injects a useful degree of caution. She describes such locations as "a male place in which it is relatively safe for men to explore the crucial terrain of homosociality. There are limits, but in these imagined subject territories, as to some degree in real ones, the schism of homophobia is not the most visible feature of geography" (*Between Men*, p198).

⁵¹ Jarrod Hayes, *Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2000), p31.

⁵² Archibald, p4.

⁵³ Shannon Russell, 'Recycling the Poor and the Fallen: Emigration Politics and the Narrative Resolutions of *Mary Barton* and *David Copperfield*' in *Imperial Objects: Essays on Victorian Women's Emigration and the Unauthorised Imperial Experience*, ed. by Rita Krandsis (New York: Twayne, 1998), pp43-63, p45.

This effort to ascribe a single, conservative meaning to Dickensian migrants fails to acknowledge the competing and contradictory uses and experiences of emigration during the period of his career. In her study of the recruitment of middle-class single women for transportation to areas of the 'New World', Archibald modifies her initial separatist thesis, arguing that while conservative promoters may well have hoped to eradicate un(re)productive spinsters, the women themselves often welcomed an assisted move from home as a liberating experience:

The image of Neo-European women ignoring the dictates of respectable society and engaging in adventurous activity may have appealed to women as a desirable alternative to the smothering life of domesticity and may have seemed exciting and refreshing to Victorian men as well.⁵⁴

In its simultaneous association with prostitutes and spinsters, emigration was figured as a way of accommodating both excess and surplus sexuality. Nan Dreher's research supports and extends Archibald's argument for competing deployments and appropriations of overseas relocation. She finds that despite its basis in conservative ideology, "emigration offered an opportunity for some redundant women to escape the situation, and the colonies served as a testing ground for more flexible social prescriptions that subsequently returned to Britain. Ironically, conservative efforts to strengthen British ideology and extend it to the colonies fatally strained it."⁵⁵

Dickens's own representations of emigration stage a similar ideological contest. Though in his journalism on prostitution Dickens unambivalently recommends emigration as social panacea, his fiction complicates this apparently conservative position through the repeated suggestion that overseas relocation also offers erotic freedom and provides opportunities for alternative lifestyles. By emphasising the (often erotic) meanings of particular locales in Dickens's fiction and rejecting the narrative convenience theory, this chapter overturns a critical de-prioritising of the foreign as 'marginal' in Dickens's work. What have been viewed as insignificant movements to the peripheries of Empire are shown to have immense repercussions for the alleged British familial centre of Dickens's works. As well as creating spaces within domestic ideology for the expression of same-sex desire, it will be

⁵⁴ Archibald, pp10-11.

⁵⁵ Dreher, p6.

demonstrated that Dickens repeatedly, though not exclusively, deploys a move overseas to signal homoerotics.

“French vagabonds and English outlaws”: Miss Wade and the Cultural Frenchifying of Lesbianism

Whilst Dickens forged an association between male same-sex desire and the perceived relaxed morality of the West Indies in *Oliver Twist*, he simultaneously drew upon the wider association of France with transgressive female sexuality. Plummer has observed the moral geography implicit in Dickens’s specific naming of Oliver Twist’s mother in his character list as ‘Agnes Fleming’: “Her last name, Fleming, is unusual and means ‘a native or inhabitant of Flanders’. The ‘sinful’ woman who transgresses society’s conventions – in choosing a lover, in having a passionate affair, in becoming pregnant outside of wedlock – is thus displaced and identified with the Continent.”⁵⁶ Plummer notes the coherence between this othering of excess sexuality through continental relocation and a wider marginalisation of other sexually ‘sinning’ figures. Oliver and Monks’s father, Edward Leeford, dies in Rome (p411), and Leeford’s legal wife (Monks’s mother), who is strongly indicted for her ability to conceal and forget her marriage and live “wholly given up to continental frivolities”, lived in Paris (p410). Dickens places these characters in those continental hotspots, Italy and France, long associated with sexual vice, inaugurating a strategy he was to deploy suggestively throughout his career. Whilst his early use of the West Indies suggested ‘immorality’ and vague libidinal excess, as Dickens’s career continued he was to draw specifically on those locales culturally associated with particular kinds of sexual impropriety, especially those imaginatively linked to same-sex desire.

As Crompton persuasively argues, by the Georgian period there was an established and repeatedly articulated dogma about “the absolute foreignness of same-sex attractions.”⁵⁷ However this othering of homoerotics did not extend equally to all foreign countries, but as this chapter demonstrates, clustered associatively around particular locales. Such sites developed a connotative richness in the Victorian imagination, allowing various authors to employ them as a thinly coded erotic shorthand, a practice in which Dickens fully

⁵⁶ Plummer, p270.

⁵⁷ Crompton, p52.

participated, specifically drawing-on and contributing to perceived queer diasporas. As Sadrin argues in her exploration of why the assumed adulterous trust of Edith and Carker in *Dombey and Son* takes place in Dijon, such sexual illicitness or “French wickedness” was firmly sited during the nineteenth century: “It goes without saying that the town chosen for a secret and unlawful appointment between a man and a woman had to be a French town.”⁵⁸ Littlewood describes how the increasing speed of travel and the growing association of sex and tourism encouraged by notorious figures, especially Byron, resulted in an increasing number of Victorians who “began to use the Continent as a refuge where pleasure could be snatched in the discreet intervals of a virtuous working life. The most immediate focus for such trips was Paris, a city whose reputation was well established by the end of the eighteenth century.”⁵⁹

Much speculation has centred on whether Dickens used France in this way during the final decade of his career, as a more discreet site for his relationship with Ellen Ternan. Claire Tomalin acknowledges that no definitive proof can be produced to explain Ellen’s complete absence from family records and gatherings in the period 1862-5, which coincides with “Dickens’s ‘perpetual’ (his own word) cross-Channel trips during these years.”⁶⁰ Whilst no concrete evidence is available, Tomalin amply demonstrates the mysterious silences, contradictions and falsehoods in Dickens’s correspondence regarding his continental trips during this period. She suggests that “like his contemporary Flaubert, he was very quick to grasp the possibilities offered by rail travel to those who wanted to live a double or secret life.”⁶¹ Leon Litvack reaches a similar conclusion, proposing that placing Ellen in France would be consistent with Dickens’s previous use of the country as a convenient escape route permitting a “double life”, and providing a hiding place from the immense pressures of work and ever increasing celebrity.⁶² If, as seems most likely, Dickens did establish a site of retreat in the vicinity of Paris or the Channel ports for himself and Ellen Ternan, this

⁵⁸ Sadrin, p17.

⁵⁹ Littlewood, p120.

⁶⁰ Tomalin, *The Invisible Woman*, p135.

⁶¹ Ibid., p138.

⁶² Leon Litvack, ‘Dickens Abroad’, talk given for The Dickens Explorer Course, Charles Dickens Museum, London, 11 November 2003.

strategy would have continued his personal fondness for the country, and his association of it with sexual liberation, begun in his travels to Paris with Wilkie Collins.⁶³

Catherine Peters argues that in their London ‘nightly wanderings into strange places’ (to use Dickens’s own phrase) and in mutual overseas adventures, Collins’s “openness about sexual behaviour gradually helped to free Dickens from the prison of his status as a Victorian household icon.”⁶⁴ She describes the way in which throughout the 1850s they “prowled the Haymarket and Regent Street, notorious for rowdiness, the number of ‘night houses’ and the open transactions of the prostitutes [. . .] It was Dickens’s favourite way of seeking out subjects for investigative journalism, but there is no reason to suppose that this was their only purpose. There are many hints in Dickens’s letters to Wilkie that he took courage from his younger companion’s relaxed attitude to sexual adventures.”⁶⁵ Certainly Dickens’s correspondence is at its most playfully relaxed when suggesting continental pleasures, achieving a tone of naughty revelry rarely found in his domestic communications. His letter inviting Collins to France with him mischievously proposes “a career of amiable and unbounded license in the metropolis. If you will come and breakfast with me about midnight – anywhere – any day – and go to bed no more until we fly to these pastoral retreats – I shall be delighted to have so vicious an associate.”⁶⁶ Early the following year, Dickens wrote to Regnier of the Comedie-Francaise to arrange similar excitements for their return trip. He requests help in finding a more flexible hotel than his usual choice, the Hotel Brighton:

[T]here they expect one to dine at home [. . .] whereas we are coming to Paris expressly to be always looking about us, we want to dine wherever we like, every day [. . .] I want it to be pleasant and gay, and to throw myself en garçon on the festive diableries de Paris.”⁶⁷

An 1854 *Household Words* article, ‘Paris With a Mask On’, points to the diverse nature of such diableries, describing such ‘harmful’ entertainments whilst reinforcing the typical British perception of Paris as immoral site of licentiously relaxed habits. The piece is

⁶³ Tomalin documents the magnetism that France exerted on Dickens, who “was enchanted by most aspects of the French way of life from his first encounter with it when he was in his thirties” (p136).

⁶⁴ Peters, *The King of Inventors*, p101.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p99.

⁶⁶ Charles Dickens to Wilkie Collins, 12 July 1854, *Letters*, VII (1993), p366.

⁶⁷ Charles Dickens to Philocles Regnier, 3 February 1855, *Letters*, VII, pp522-523.

loaded with scathing ‘observations’ of the Parisians’ “general love of extravagance”, and value laden reportage, such as the detail that by three in the afternoon “every Parisian has had his breakfast.” For a usually cautious family journal, this piece also includes a surprisingly explicit account of cross-dressing and the darkly hinted, implicitly (homo)sexual ‘harm’ of such practice, providing a further example of an ‘exotic’ setting permitting articulation of otherwise silenced sexual material, and thus (paradoxically) bringing it home into the hearthside family group:

Where is the fun? It is true that amid the yells of a crowd of boys, a couple of maskers have passed, consisting of a woman dressed in man’s clothes, and a man in petticoats; but surely there is nothing very funny or very commendable, or even harmless in that.⁶⁸

Given Dickens’s awareness of such ambiguously gendered entertainments and his careful seeking out of this seamier side of Parisian entertainment (an attraction of the city that Thomas Cook later advised his patrons to shun⁶⁹), it seems unlikely that he could have failed to notice the well advertised diversity of the local sex industry. As Littlewood has documented, Bachelor Guides of this period openly recommended spots for “Lesbian diversions”, reflecting and contributing to a long literary history of French lesbianism.⁷⁰ This historical association was exacerbated in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century by widely circulating accusations about the French Queen: “Whatever the truth of the matter, it is clear that rumours about Marie Antoinette’s homosexuality had begun to spread across France – and even to England – well before the French revolution.”⁷¹ Terry Castle provides a detailed account of this scandal, observing its currency and longevity into the nineteenth century: “Lesbian diarist Anne Lister, visiting Paris in 1825, reported hearing from one of her female lovers there that ‘Marie Antoinette was accused of being too fond of women.’”⁷² An early eighteenth-century tract, ‘Plain Reasons for the Growth of Sodomy in England’, firmly places the blame with Italy, the alleged “mother and nurse of

⁶⁸ ‘Paris With a Mask On’, *Household Words*, 29 April 1854.

⁶⁹ Littlewood, p122.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Castle, *Apparitional*, p128.

⁷² Ibid., p131. The greater visibility of French ‘lesbianism’ is a more specific strand of the British appreciation of “French wickedness” that Sadrin discusses. Debates about the sexual immorality of French novels raged throughout Dickens’s career. *Blackwood’s Magazine* offers a typical combination of awe and disapprobation in a review of “the modern romance writers of France – Victor Hugo, Janin, Madame Dudevant [George Sand], and Sue – by whom vice and licentiousness are exhibited with vast power” (‘The Historical Romance’, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, September 1845, p356).

sodomy” and with France, a country that is apparently disproportionately successful in producing nuns who are “criminally *amorous* of each other in a Method too gross for Expression.”⁷³ These sentiments are directly reiterated in a 1749 work, which asks: “Have we not Sins enough of our own, but we must eke ‘em out with those of Foreign nations, to fill up the cup of our abominations?” In this vein, the author insists that in Italy “the Master is oftener intriguing with his Page than a fair Lady”, and adds to observations of lesbianism in French nunneries that such behaviour has now “‘got footing’ among English women of quality, and is practised in Twickenham as well as in Turkey.”⁷⁴

Dickens’s most legible ‘lesbian’ figure is carefully associated with each of these suggestive locales. Socially ostracised and existing outside the respectable margins of community, “Miss Wade mostly lives abroad” (p517). She has previously elected to travel in Italy, (p630, p633), a locale also chosen by both the villainous Blandois and her former seducer Gowan, the latter’s marriage tour offering a decided echo of Steerforth’s unwed ‘honeymoon’ with Little Em’ly in “France, Switzerland, Italy, in fact, almost all parts” (p616). Daniel Defoe’s popular poem ‘The True Born Englishman’ (1701) firmly reiterates the linkage of this final country with same-sex praxis in his geographical assignment of sin: “Lust chose the torrid zone of Italy/ Where Blood ferments in Rapes and Sodomy.”⁷⁵ Dickens owned a copy of this poem, which was reprinted in Walter Scott’s 1840 collected edition of Defoe. So acceptable was this jingoistic citation of Italian vice, that Defoe’s other works capitalised on its popular success, advertising under this title. Dickens’s own copy of Defoe’s *Jure Divino*, itemised in the Stonehouse catalogue, bears the heading ‘by the author of The True Born Englishman’. Steerforth’s heterosexual seduction tour ends, significantly, in the purportedly sodomitic locale of Naples, where he becomes especially restless and abandons his mistress in favour of the distinctly homoerotic pleasures of a male Mediterranean sailing tour.

⁷³ ‘Plain Reasons for the Growth of Sodomy in England’ (c1728), quoted by Littlewood, p28. The author participates in the often anti-Catholically motivated popular construction of the French lesbian nun, an anti-papist strategy exemplified by Diderot’s eighteenth century novel *La Religieuse*.

⁷⁴ ‘Satan’s Harvest Home: or the Present State of Whorecraft, Adultery, Fornication, Procuring, Pimping, Sodomy . . . and Other Satanic Works, Daily Propagated in this Good Protestant Kingdom’, quoted by Hyde, pp82-83.

⁷⁵ Daniel De Foe, ‘The True Born Englishman’, *The Novels and Miscellaneous Works of Daniel De Foe*, ed. by Walter Scott, 6 vols (London: Bohn, 1854-1856), V (1855), pp434-463, p435.

Whilst predominantly associated with sex between men, Italy also had a symbolic meaning for nineteenth-century women travellers. Littlewood documents the erotic liberation Italy offered to travellers such as Mary Shelley and Frances Trollope: “Standing for the fulfilment of desire and the possibility of spiritual expansion beyond the confines of normal life, it promised release from the prosaic conditions of domesticity and enjoyment of an alternative reality which both permitted and encouraged self-gratification.”⁷⁶ Without eliding the important differences in male and female homoerotic experience, literary and actual expatriation provides a method by which the same-sex desires of both men and women can be both expressed and forwarded. Dickens’s use of specific locales to signal the homoerotics of both women and men draws upon the popular understanding of particular sites as well as the sexually liberating overseas experiences of his contemporaries of both sexes.⁷⁷

The contemporary connotations of particular locations directly inform Dickens’s homoerotic deployment of them. Whilst her travels, in the allegedly sodomitic zone of Italy, suggest Miss Wade’s release from those British domestic structures that in their insistence on family as the crucial site of identity have ever made her an aberration, Dickens firmly sites the novel’s most explicit and developed homoerotic relationship in France, the locale culturally most associated with lesbianism. Miss Wade first meets Harriet in the decidedly feverish region of Marseilles. They later return to this country’s especially liminal port-town, Calais, for the most open revelations of their relationship. At this French site Miss Wade gives Arthur Clennam her ‘History’, which concludes with the triumphant assertion: “We have been living together ever since, sharing my small means” (p643).⁷⁸ This confessional document, detailing Miss Wade’s extremely intense

⁷⁶ Littlewood, p63.

⁷⁷ Castle, for instance, documents the Parisian lesbian community enjoyed by many expatriates in the early twentieth century (*Apparitional*, p168).

⁷⁸ As discussed in the second chapter, letters between women in Dickens’s fiction combine expressions of the pain at being separated whilst providing an epistolary corporeal substitute for the beloved absent body, on which otherwise prohibited sexual contact can be enacted. The importance of letters in facilitating the expression of such explicitly physical encounters between women is repeated throughout Dickens’s work. This homoerotic significance provides a rationale for what tends to be dismissed as the clumsy or ill conceived structuring of Miss Wade’s personal history. Though Miss Wade’s personal account lacks letter conventions and is strictly a condensed autobiography, her preparation of this self narrative for a select and specific reader to whom she delivers it performs the same work as a more formalised letter:

‘Shall I give you something I have written and put by for your perusal, or shall I hold my hand?’

attachments to women and her illicit sexuality with Gowan, is offered in support of her defiant declaration of her inter-female cohabitation: “Sir, whether you find me temporarily and cheaply lodging in an empty London house or in a Calais apartment, you find Harriet with me” (p632).

For an intermediate time Miss Wade and Harriet have furtively occupied an unmarked, dark and apparently empty London flat, marking their itinerancy, even at this moment of temporary stasis:

The lady whom they had come to see, if she were the present occupant of the house, appeared to have taken up her quarters there, as she might have established herself in an Eastern caravanserai. A small square of carpet in the middle of the room, a few articles of furniture that evidently did not belong to the room, and a disorder of trunks and travelling articles, formed the whole of her surroundings (p318).

On his return to the London house, Clennam finds that the couple have vanished, discovering only “that Miss Wade was gone, that the waifs and strays of furniture were gone” (p323). With no more affiliation to home, either in a national or domestic sense, than such inanimate “waifs and strays”, Miss Wade takes the similarly domestically alienated Harriet to a site specifically reserved for such national “outlaws”. Clennam eventually traces and pursues them to Calais, arriving at what is described as a magnet for “all the French vagabonds and English outlaws in the town (half the population)” (p626). As Michael Hollingford observes, the manuscript originally put this proportion at ‘three fourths’, suggesting even more explicitly the “sexual outlaw” status of Miss Wade and Tattycoram.⁷⁹ The “countrymen” that Arthur Clennam encounters in Calais are described through one of the century’s most prominent metaphors for sexual excess, as having “a straggling air of having at one time over-blown themselves, like certain uncomfortable kinds of flowers, and of being, now, mere weeds” (p627). Furthermore, the port town is heavily marked with exemplary symbols of liminality: it is characterised by a ghostly “meagre lighthouse”, an “oozy” place, struggling to remain distinct from “the undermining

Arthur begged her to give it to him. She went to the bureau, unlocked it and took from an inner drawer a few folded sheets of paper (p632).

In the use of this vehicle for the explicit revelation of her passionate relationships, Miss Wade’s account is placed in a homoerotic sequence with Julia Mills’s diary of her love for Dora Copperfield and Ada’s much embraced epistles to Esther.

⁷⁹ Companion, p249.

and besieging sea” (p626). Here Dickens employs a geographically connotative strategy similar to that used in Henry James’s *The Bostonians* (1886). In this novel, as Castle has observed, Olive takes Verena to Paris “in the hope that living on a ‘continent of strangers’ will make them ‘cleave more closely to each other.’” In his use of such “suggestive surroundings” Castle argues that James draws on a Zolarian tradition in which France itself becomes one of the “various objects and ‘props’ associated [. . .] with deviance and homosexual love.”⁸⁰ In Dickens’s setting of Miss Wade’s most triumphant declaration of her same-sex relationship in this explicitly marginal site of “outlaws”, he draws upon an existing association of France with lesbianism that allows Calais to operate as a prop, contributing further to the visibility of the domestically forbidden homoerotics of that expatriated partnership.

However, in this novel of roaming, following “all we restless travellers through the pilgrimage of life” (p40), geographical separation from home not only signals and intensifies the homoerotics of this most ostensible transgressive desire, it also permits the otherwise stifled articulation of a similarly illicit attraction, experienced by the figure assumed to be the novel’s repository of domestic virtue, Little Dorrit herself. Like Miss Wade, Little Dorrit’s most explicit avowal of homoerotic interest is facilitated by her separation from British ‘correspondent’, Arthur Clennam. The homoerotic confession penned in Calais by Miss Wade crosses the water with Clennam – he reads this narrative on the return packet to England. Similarly, Little Dorrit’s epistolary account to him of her intense response to Pet Meagles (now Minnie Gowan) whom she meets on the Dorrits’ continental tour, is enabled by her geographical separation from both Arthur and Britain.

After meeting Pet in a Swiss convent, Little Dorrit quickly involves herself in an intense bedroom scene between the two women, quietly “creeping” (as her unsympathetic sister Fanny perceives it, p438) to the room where Mrs Gowan is recovering from having fainted. As she tends to Pet, Little Dorrit is strongly affected by her physical attractions – “She is very pretty [. . .] I never saw such a beautiful face” (p428). She sanctions this impulsive erotic response by recording it, as if for Arthur Clennam’s benefit, in her letter to him from the next stage of their European tour. Writing from Venice, Little Dorrit admits: “I loved

⁸⁰ Castle, *Apparitional*, p168, p167.

her almost as soon as I spoke to her.” She swiftly justifies this extreme reaction by placing herself as proxy of Arthur, the more acceptable desirer of Pet: “I will ever be as good a friend to her as I can for your sake” (p452).

Arthur Clennam’s scrutiny is essential in enabling articulations of female homoerotic desire throughout *Little Dorrit*, and his repeated perusal of such relationships is performed through his reading of various female (quasi) epistles sent from abroad. Miss Wade’s record of passionate love for her “chosen friend[s]” resonates strongly with Little Dorrit’s recounting of a similarly intense attachment in her letters to Arthur Clennam. Clennam’s heterosexually sanctioned attraction to Pet Meagles permits and rationalises Little Dorrit’s expression of interest in Pet’s physical perfection. Significantly, the only rationale Miss Wade provides for sharing her life-story with Clennam is intimately related to their interdependent erotic connections to Pet:

I have for some time inclined to tell you what my life has been [. . .] that you may comprehend, when you think of your dear friend [Gowan] and his dear wife [Pet], what I mean by hating (632).

Indeed, Miss Wade’s insatiable desire to look at Pet incites the travels that bring her into contact with Harriet: “I was restlessly curious to look at her – so curious that I felt it to be one of the few sources of entertainment left to me. I travelled a little: travelled until I found myself in her society” (p642). Armstrong convincingly argues that Miss “Wade has an obsessive emotional and psychological connection to Pet [. . .] in seducing Pet’s maid, Wade has seduced a substitute Pet.”⁸¹ Thus, Clennam’s socially acceptable desire for Pet becomes a significant enabler of female articulations of their attraction to her and to other women.

In her first meeting with Pet, Little Dorrit employs Arthur’s desire to justify her physical contact with Pet and admiration of her physicality:

‘I know I must be right. I know he spoke of her that evening. I could very easily be wrong on any other subject. But not on this, not on this!’

With a quiet and tender hand she put aside a straying fold of the sleeper’s

⁸¹ Armstrong, *What can you Two be Together?*, pp254-255. Armstrong traces this obsession through Miss Wade’s hire of Blandois to spy on Pet to the intense antagonism Pet causes between Tattycoram and Miss Wade: “Pet’s name in fact, cannot be mentioned, an omission that heightens her importance and the emotional charge that surrounds her” (p256).

hair and then touched the hand that lay outside the covering.

‘I like to look at her,’ she breathed to herself. ‘I like to see what has affected him so much’ (p428).

Significantly, Clennam has never provided Little Dorrit with a description of Pet by which to recognise her. Little Dorrit’s certainty that she looks at Clennam’s beloved is entirely founded in her complicity with that erotic love. She has an intense appreciation of the potential for desiring Pet, which strongly implicates her in that desire. Her letters to Clennam complexly exploit Pet’s physicality to generate Clennam’s interest in the epistles (she begins both letters with an almost immediate reference to the Gowans), and to demonstrate a highly physicalised, sympathetic identification with his erotic interests:

Who could help loving so beautiful and winning a creature! I could not wonder at anyone loving her. No, indeed. [. . .] And she looked most beautiful (pp451-452).

Little Dorrit’s second letter to Clennam reinforces her physical appreciation of Pet. Her imperative sense that Pet’s husband “must admire her beauty” marks her complicity with both Gowan’s and Clennam’s desire (p529).

Little Dorrit deploys her correspondence strategically, to both express and then recast her inter-female interest as sanctioned by acceptable heterosexual desire:

I had only been watchful for you, and had only noticed what I think I have noticed because I was quickened by your interest in it. Indeed you may be sure this is the truth (p530).

This uncharacteristic ardency and unnecessary assertion of truth from a figure characterised by her honesty bespeaks the imperative to rationalise the dangerous homoerotic connotations of this extreme interest. Little Dorrit’s erotic accounts of Pet frequently threaten to destroy the permitting fiction of Arthur’s desire. In acknowledging that she doesn’t tell much he doesn’t already know about Pet, she gets dangerously close to an admission that Arthur’s assumed interest is merely a convenient device that permits her to talk on a favourite theme:

You know the truth of this, as you know everything, far far better than I; but *I cannot help* telling you what a nature she shows, and that you can never think too well of her (p530, emphasis added).

The final marital union of Little Dorrit and Clenam as unfulfilled lovers of Pet replicates the consolatory marriage of Toots and Susan Nipper, Florence Dombey's failed 'suitors'.

The narrative of Little Dorrit's overseas travel provides a justifying frame for her highly homoerotic compulsive epistles. This strategy coheres with Dickens's wider use of plots of departure, distance and travel to enable the most extreme expressions of same-sex emotion – those previously discussed expressions of female anguish at parting when one friend married, for example. The male necessity for foreign travel, ostensibly for trading purposes, offers a parallel plot for the expression of a crisis of separation between men. Through removal overseas the separation plot acquires the additional homoerotic resonance of the connotations attached to particular sites.

“Going up the Nile and Seeing Wonders”: Egypt and the Homoerotic Fantasies of Nineteenth-Century Britain

Sedgwick's analysis of '*Edwin Drood* and the Homophobia of Empire' focuses on Dickens's final unfinished novel, using a framework of later nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theories and experiences of overseas homosexuality, articulated by the infamous figures of Richard Burton and T. E. Lawrence. She demonstrates that there is much mileage in positioning *Edwin Drood* against the narratives of these later “imperial adventurers who produce male homosexuality as an oriental, and particularly Middle Eastern practice.”⁸² Without noting the anachronism, Sedgwick uses Burton's theory of a 'Sotadic Zone' of allegedly endemic non-Western homosexuality propounded in the famous 'Terminal Essay' of his *Thousand Nights and a Night* (1885-1888), to explicate the penetrative homosexual imagery of Dickens's 1870 work:

Rosa may munch serenely on her sticky Turkish Lumps-of-Delight candy;
but for the English male, there is more at stake in Turkish pleasures. At stake,
for instance, in the opium dream of the novel's first paragraph, is a Sultanly
habit of impaling men on spikes. Burton describes some related Oriental habits.⁸³

⁸² Suvendrini Pevera, *Reaches of Empire: The English Novel from Edgeworth to Dickens* (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), p112.

⁸³ Sedgwick, p189.

To observe the textual anachronism of this reading is not to invalidate its appreciation of Dickens's use of specific locales to express sex between men.

Following Sedgwick, critics have read Dickens's final novel as a site where the "concentric model" of empire, a "structure of hierarchical asymmetry, with the metropolis at the centre, and colonies or other supplementary economies at the periphery of the knowable universe", is most rigorously challenged.⁸⁴ Through the dark figure of opium-soaked Jasper, it is argued that orientalist homosexuality is brought home:

Embracing the 'unclean spirit of imitation' lodged in opium, Jasper succumbs indiscriminately to the degraded ways of the Chinese, Turks and Lascars. These ways, of which opium is the signifier, encompass a whole spectrum of 'oriental' 'vices', among them effeminacy, homosexuality, and 'thuggee'.⁸⁵

However, this emphasis on Jasper obscures the continuity in this novel of a similarly homoerotically suggestive use of the orient. Jasper's intense feeling for the nephew whom he ogles with "hungry, exacting watchful, and yet devoted affection" (p15) has been legible enough to enter critical discourse as a rare acknowledged instance of homoerotic desire in Dickens's fiction. However, his beloved nephew Edwin – whose failure properly to value the Bud or Pussy reserved for him is central to the plot – is also implicated in this more visible transgressive desire. Edwin is complicit with this excessive attention, which he both courts and revels in. He eagerly reiterates another character's observation of Jasper's immoderate devotion: "Your uncle's too much wrapped up in you, that's where it is" (p16), repeatedly echoing this phrase (p149, 150), and boastfully describing this attachment: "With me Jack is always impulsive and hurried, and, I may say, almost womanish" (p150). Whilst Edwin accepts the housekeeper's reading of Jasper's affection as "too much" – "Of course I knew that you were extremely fond of me", he tells Jasper (p21) – he is keen to emphasise the mutuality of this avowedly excessive relationship: "you love and trust me, as I love and trust you" (p20). The narrative constructs a clear imbalance

⁸⁴ David Faulkner, 'The Confidence Man: Empire and the Deconstruction of Muscular Christianity in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*' in *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, ed. by Donald Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), pp175-193. Plummer makes a similar point, arguing that in *Edwin Drood* what she sees as a typical resolution technique of "shipping the chaotic characters happily off to the colonies", is reversed: "The novel begins with a description of the influx of chaotic elements from the colonies" (p275).

⁸⁵ Pevera, p112. This echoes Sedgwick's observation of the three things that become articulated, but remain entangled, in Jasper's reveries under the "Un-English" substance, "his love for his nephew, his need to do violence, and the rhythm of sexual desire" (p189, p188).

between Edwin's passionate response to his improperly desiring uncle and his extremely muted enthusiasm for the fiancé whose otherwise widely appealing body functions as the locus for avowed desire in the novel. Indeed, Edwin perceives the perversity in his lack of ardour, insisting that given free selection he "would choose Pussy from all the pretty girls in the world" (p18). The later suggestion that Edwin may prefer Helena Landless, another orientalised dark figure, who in twinship with a brother has an explicit physical and psychical similarity to a male body, does little to bolster his insufficient performance of heterosexual lust.

In this novel, 'foreignness' is also a central element of the homoerotic relationship that repatriated Helena Landless enjoys with the English Rosa. Given the broader homotropical economy of this specific work and Dickens's oeuvre more widely, Helena's upbringing in Ceylon and her indeterminate race gives extra resonance to her highly erotic involvement with another woman.⁸⁶ The gender confusion engendered by Helena's twinship with Neville is intensified by a 'foreign' childhood during which she repeatedly "dressed as a boy, and showed the daring of a man" (p64). Such behaviour accords with British travellers' accounts such as that of Charles Dilke, who discovered Ceylon to be a site at which pre-existing gender assumptions were challenged. In the record of his 1866 trip to Ceylon (published 1869) Dilke observed that wives were "far more rough and 'manly' than their husbands" and resolved to "set down everybody that was womanly as a man, and everyone that was manly as a woman."⁸⁷ Tim Dolin discounts Helena's direct association with the widespread figuration of the exotic, sexual 'other' to argue that "her role (as his twin) is simply to show Neville a version of himself made English, reinforcing the novel's persistent association of privacy, domesticity, femininity and national character."⁸⁸ Dolin's account fails to recognise the wider significance of life overseas in Dickens's fiction, which makes Helena's status as an emigrant central to the signification of her homoerotic desire.

Helena's migration into the text is reversed in the similarly homosexually suggestive proposal for Edwin's emigration. One possible resolution of Edwin's heterosexual

⁸⁶ In a working note Dickens pondered "Mixture of Oriental blood – or imperceptibly acquired mixture in them?" Quoted by Tim Dolin, 'Race and the Social Plot in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*' in *The Victorians and Race*, ed. by Shearer West (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1996), pp84-101, p85.

⁸⁷ Charles Dilke, *Greater Britain: Charles Dilke Visits Her New Lands 1866 and 1867*, ed. by G. Blainey (Sydney: Methuen Haynes, 1985), p168.

⁸⁸ Dolin, p96.

ambivalence is proposed in the plan to marry Rosa Bud and “then go engineering in the East” (p21). The destination is soon specified as Egypt (p31), which through association with the similarly carefully specified previous journeys of a number of ‘inappropriately’ sexual male characters in Dickens’s fiction, functions as both homoerotic resolution and revelation. In his desire to “wake up Egypt a little” (p72), Edwin expresses the magnetic draw that this country exerts on a number of Dickens’s sexually excessive later male characters. After Harthouse’s failed seduction of the married Louisa in *Hard Times*, he is compelled “to go up the Nile [. . .] going in for camels” (p229). This movement suggests the wider association of the Orient, especially through popular images of the seraglio, with hetero- as well as homosexual ‘excess’.⁸⁹ However, Harthouse’s attraction to Louisa, as the previous chapter suggests, has been intimately bound up in and orchestrated through the comparable body of her brother. In *Great Expectations* ostensible heterosexual attractions are again destabilised by emotional and erotic priorities between men, which, as this section examines in detail, are both resolved and further articulated by relocation to Egypt.

Egypt, and the orient more generally, had a powerful association with same-sex desire in the Victorian imagination. By relying on infamous turn-of-the-century writers to buttress her interpretation of the homophobia of empire, Sedgwick denies her reading of *Edwin Drood* the contemporary cultural homoeroticising of specific locales that occurred before and during Dickens’s career, ignoring those earlier sources that Dickens and his contemporaries were aware of. As evidence amassed by Aldrich, Colette Colligan, Rudi Bleys and Joseph Boone demonstrates, Burton’s theories did not emerge from nowhere. Instead, Burton’s ‘Sotadic Zone’ tapped into existing national fantasies and beliefs to crystallise a variety of earlier discourses that attempted to map same sex praxis:

The idea of warm climates breeding sexual irregularities was not new

⁸⁹ See Colette Colligan’s discussion of the “Victorian harem fantasy” which proliferated in an obscene print culture that repeatedly produced tales along the lines of *The Lustful Turk* (1828) [“A Race of Born Pederasts”: Sir Richard Burton, Homosexuality, and the Arabs’, *Nineteenth Century Contexts*, 25 (2003), pp1-20, p6, p16]. Dickens provides an explicit version of this fantasy in his portion of the 1859 collaborative Christmas story ‘A Haunted House’. Haunted by the phantom of childhood memory, the adult protagonist fantasises of when he was a schoolboy and proposed to a friend that they “should have a seraglio”, through which they would become “blessed in the smiles of eight of the fairest of the daughters of men”:

The other creature assented warmly. He had no notion of respectability, neither had I. It was the custom of the East, it was the way of the good Caliph Hauron Alraschild [. . .] the usage was highly laudable and most worthy of imitation [collected in *Christmas Stories* (Oxford: Penguin, 1991), pp221-252, pp246-247].

nor was the association of pederasty with the Arabic and Asian worlds.⁹⁰

Colligan's investigation of pre-Victorian texts demonstrates that "from the early nineteenth century, the English believed that the Arabs were notorious sodomites."⁹¹ Indeed, Burton had himself formulated many of his 'Sotadic' theories some thirty years before they finally reached publication in his version of the *Nights*. He had hoped to share his "curiosity for marriage customs and sexual practices of different nations", including such material in the notes to his *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to al Madinah and Meccah*. However, the publisher of this 1855 travel book "suppressed it all as 'garbage.'"⁹²

Said reads the (perceived) availability of "a different type of sexuality" as central to the appeal of the Orient to nineteenth-century Europeans:

Just as the various colonial possessions – quite apart from their economic benefit to metropolitan Europe – were useful as places to send wayward sons, superfluous populations of delinquents, poor people, and other undesirables, so the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe. Virtually no European writer who wrote on or travelled to the Orient in the period after 1800 exempted himself or herself from this quest.⁹³

Despite Said's inclusion of Flaubert, who famously wrote home of his Egyptian 'experiments' in sodomy, and "'Dirty Dick' Burton" in his list of prominent questers, he refuses to name the powerful cultural conjunction of sex between men and the Orient. Jeffrey Schneider argues that "although Said seems unable and/or unwilling to move beyond euphemisms in his discussion of 'Oriental sex', the British had no problem whatever in identifying the form of sexuality they most often, and traditionally associated with the Orient – sodomy (more specifically, sodomitical relations between men)."⁹⁴ This link is re-forged repeatedly throughout the period, most explicitly in candid private letters such as those Flaubert sent from Egypt in 1850:

One admits one's sodomy and talks about it at the dinner table. Sometimes

⁹⁰ Aldrich, *Colonialism*, p51. Importantly, at this period pederasty was more broadly used to denote all sexual relations between men (OED).

⁹¹ Colligan, p5.

⁹² Fatma Moussa-Mahmoud, 'English Travellers and the *Arabian Nights*', in *The Arabian Nights in English Literature*, ed. by Peter Caracciolo (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), pp95-110, p106.

⁹³ Said, p190.

⁹⁴ Jeffrey Schneider, 'Secret Sins of the Orient: Creating a (Homo)Textual Context for Reading Byron's *The Giaour*', *College English*, 65.1 (2002), pp81-95, p82.

one denies it a bit, then everyone yells at you and it ends up getting admitted
[. . .] The opportunity hasn't presented itself yet: nonetheless we are looking
for it.⁹⁵

In a later letter he has availed himself of such an opportunity and hopes to repeat the
experience, avowedly for reasons of further exploration rather than pleasure.

Byron had earlier penned a more enthusiastic sodomitic correspondence during his travels
in the Mediterranean and Albania. As Louis Crompton documents, Byron's letter to
Matthews just before he left for Greece "shows [. . .] that both anticipated that his visit
there would lead to homoerotic adventures."⁹⁶ Indeed, before this extended tour Byron
"had made no direct or open allusions to homosexuality in his correspondence; now he
recurs repeatedly to the subject."⁹⁷ Frequenting Turkish baths he described as "marble
palace[s] of sherbet and sodomy"⁹⁸, Byron continually reinforces the traditional association
of the Orient with same-sex praxis:

In England the vices in fashion are whoring and drinking, in Turkey, Sodomy
and smoking. We prefer a girl and a bottle, they a pipe and a pathic. – They
are sensible people.⁹⁹

These private accounts reflect with exuberant explicitness a more muted nineteenth-century
public discourse of Oriental homosex. Public accounts typically combined climatic, moral
and racial assumptions with a strong vein of religious prejudice, repeatedly echoing "the
claim first made during the Middle Ages that a close affinity existed between sodomitical
practices and Islam."¹⁰⁰ Jeremy Bentham, for example, stated in the late eighteenth century
(published 1838) that "even now, wherever the Mahometan religion prevails, such practices
['crimes against nature'] seem to be attended with but little disrepute."¹⁰¹ This link was
reinforced in travel writing and informed anxieties about the sexual 'corruption' of

⁹⁵ Quoted and translated by Hayes, p30. For further discussion see Aldrich, *Colonialism*, pp329-330.

⁹⁶ Crompton, p109.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p126. Crompton acknowledges his anachronistic use of 'homosexuality', but deploys the term to
refer to sexual relations between men.

⁹⁸ 12 August 1819, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie Marchand, 12 vols (Cambridge: Harvard UP,
1973-1982), VI (1976), p207. Quoted by Crompton, p142.

⁹⁹ 3 May 1810, *Byron's Letters*, I, p238. Quoted by Crompton, p143.

¹⁰⁰ Rudi Bleys, *The Geography of Perversion* (New York and London: Cassell, 1996), p163.

¹⁰¹ *The works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. by John Bowring, 11 vols (1838-43, rpt. New York: Russell and
Russell, 1962), I, p175.

Europeans stationed in Islamic countries for military and trading purposes.¹⁰² Particular concern focused on the “pernicious effects of service in North Africa, and fraternisation with Arabs on French morals” given the “widespread visibility of *moeurs arabes* among French regiments during the occupation of Algiers in 1830.”¹⁰³

Whilst this potent combination of xenophobia and homophobia could be deployed punitively, (Crompton argues that the accusation of un-Englishness was used to justify the severity of “punishment for the individual who strayed so far from the national norm” in practising sodomy¹⁰⁴), personal accounts show that this ideology could be enabling and liberating. Schneider observes the paradox of the separatist Orientalising of same-sex praxis as a repressive technique:

Although writers treated sodomy with the same fear and loathing as did the public at large, they completely removed it from a British setting and reconstituted it as the Oriental (foreign) vice, thus attempting to achieve with pen and paper what the gallows and pillory could not – the eradication of sodomy in Britain.¹⁰⁵

However, this othering permitted “textual representation [which] was not seen as a threat at all.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, a writer like Byron could consciously draw on a shared cultural imagination of Oriental homosex, selecting very specific settings “as a means of alerting his reader to the ‘queer’ possibilities at work in the text.” As Schneider argues, “it is precisely because the Orient is so clearly constructed as a (homo)textual universe that such a hermeneutic is possible.”¹⁰⁷

A parallel argument can be made for Dickens’s repeated selection of Egypt as ‘queer’ locale. He was immersed in homoerotic Orientalism as cultural imaginary, especially as routed through the highly sexualised figure of Byron and the heavily erotic *Arabian Nights*, which had such a rich effect on his imagination. This is not to suggest that Egypt had a purely sexual significance for Dickens and his society; recurrent travel and exploration literature in the Stonehouse catalogue demonstrates Dickens’s particular fascination with

¹⁰² For bibliography of nineteenth-century travel reports of Arab same-sex praxis see Bleys, p112.

¹⁰³ Aldrich *Colonialism*, p329, Bleys, p112.

¹⁰⁴ Crompton, p55.

¹⁰⁵ Schneider, ‘Secret Sins’, p84.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p85.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p93.

the search for the origin of the Nile, and during the 1860s popular interest shifted from fascination with the tomb goods brought to Britain by Giovanni Belzoni (on which Dickens wrote a *Household Words* piece in 1851) to attention to the pioneering engineering of the Suez canal (opened in November 1869).¹⁰⁸ However, such concerns competed with the longer association of the Orient with sex between men, a link suggestively reinforced for Dickens's period by Byron's poetry.

Dickens, although dismissive in his correspondence of Byron's "gloomy greatness", clearly internalised many of the productions of the foremost poet of his youth, repeatedly quoting him.¹⁰⁹ In his library at Gad's Hill he kept two editions of Byron's complete works (1829 and 1837) as well as a later edition of *Childe Harold*. Importantly, Dickens's travellers paraphrase and refer to Byron at key moments of departure and return:

Martin Chuzzlewit while in America, receives a letter from a young poet,
enquiring about boat-fare to England and 'any critical observations that
have ever presented themselves to your reflective faculties' on *Cain*. [. . .]
Micawber on embarking for Australia, translates Byron into the familial
plural with 'our Boat is on the shore, and our Bark is on the sea'
(*'To Thomas Moore'*).¹¹⁰

Micawber adapts a poem included in Byron's letter from his liberating overseas travels to an intimate male friend, which combines an expression of an urgent need for escape despite the dangers of ocean and desert (stanza three) with a love for this friend and implied sorrow at their parting: "Were 't the last drop in the well,/ As I gasp'd upon the brink, /Ere my fainting spirit fell,/ 'Tis to thee that I would drink."¹¹¹ Dickens's familiarity with this poem and its position in his conception of parting and emigration suggests his awareness of Byron's travels as a response to social liminality. His appreciation of Byron as traveller is further suggested by his plan in 1844 to rent Byron's former villa near Genoa.¹¹² Dickens

¹⁰⁸ For more on the cultural significance of tomb discovery and the Suez canal see Hyangji Park "'Going to Wake Up Egypt': Exhibiting Empire in *Edwin Drood*", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 30.2 (2002), pp529-550.

¹⁰⁹ 'Lord Byron', *Companion*, p65.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Byron, *To Thomas Moore*, 10 July 1817, collected in *Byron: A Self Portrait: Letters and Dairies*, ed. by Peter Quennell, 2 vols (London: Murray, 1950), II, p413.

¹¹² 'Lord Byron', p65. Instead Dickens secured another villa for twelve months in Genoa, where he was powerfully reminded of Byron. See *Pictures from Italy* (1846) collected in *American Notes and Pictures from Italy* (London: Oxford UP, 1957), p259, pp324-325.

would almost certainly have been aware of the sexually transgressive nature of Byron's experiences abroad. Andrew Elfenbein argues that during the earlier part of the Victorian period, knowledge of Byron's bisexuality circulated as an "open secret", well known to particular circles including members of Dickens's social set such as close friend William Macready.¹¹³ In his fiction Dickens openly refers to ambiguities of gender and sexuality surrounding Byron, as the first chapter's discussion of the cross-dressed Byron/ Mary Queen of Scots waxwork has suggested. His standard portrayal of Byron as exerting a strong charismatic force over both men and women is exemplified in the early sketch 'Horatio Sparkins', when the mysterious hero enters the ballroom:

'How like Lord Byron!' murmured Miss Teresa.

'Or Montgomery!' whispered Miss Marianne.

'Or the portraits of Captain Cook!' suggested Tom.¹¹⁴

This enthusiastic comparison of the same figure to Byron and Captain Cook, the age's most eminent explorer, again emphasises the importance of travel to Dickens's eroticised conception of Byron. Throughout the century knowledge of Byron's same-sex praxis increased, and by the 1890s Oscar Wilde speculated on a homoerotic tension between Byron and Shelley and compared himself to Byron in *De Profundis* as another figure "hounded from British society because of sexual misconduct."¹¹⁵

Though the homoerotic content of *The Arabian Nights* was yet to be explicitly revealed in Burton's infamous translation (published only fifteen years after Dickens's death), like Byron's about-to-become-public-knowledge bisexuality, awareness of this material can be seen to circulate as an open secret during the period of Dickens's career. The importance of the medieval Persian classic to Dickens's imagination is well documented, and everywhere evidenced by quotation and allusion from this work in his fiction. As Sanders puts it, "these tales kept his fancy, like David Copperfield's, alive and spurred "the hope of something beyond" the limits of place and unhappy times. The 'beyondness' of these stories seems always to have been associated with the exotic and the wonderful, with magic

¹¹³ Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians*, p212. Elfenbein discusses Macready's knowing embarrassment when asked to comment on the cause of Byron's marital separation.

¹¹⁴ Charles Dickens, 'Horatio Sparkins' in *Monthly Magazine*, February 1834, rpt. *Dickens's Journalism*, I, p348.

¹¹⁵ Elfenbein, p237.

and luxury.”¹¹⁶ Michael Slater continues this dissociation of the erotic from the Arabian exotic, despite the powerful conceptual link between the two in Victorian culture: “The strong erotic element in the *Nights* tends to disappear [. . .] in Dickens’s fond reminiscences about them.”¹¹⁷ As Muhsin Jassim Ali documents, however, anxiety about the sexual material of these tales was repeatedly expressed during Dickens’s lifetime in reactions to Galland’s translation as “coarse” and “indecent”.¹¹⁸ Significantly, Dickens gives fulsome praise to this edition in the opening of his satire ‘The Thousand and One Humbugs’, apparently rejecting prudish calls for further bowdlerisation.¹¹⁹ Competing calls “for a faithful but decorous version” drew national attention to the perceived sexual excesses of the *Nights*. Robert Fergusson, for example, paradoxically called for a complete *Nights* in 1825, but quickly restricted the demand to only the “translatable” tales, “for some of the *escapades* of the Asiatic writers are too free for our Northern ears.”¹²⁰ Thus knowledge of the sexual content of the *Nights* circulated along with a wider cultural linkage of the Orient and same-sex praxis, making this text, as Boone suggests, a powerful player in queer imaginaries:

This work has served, since its transmission to the West in 1704, as one of the subliminal conduits through which the myth of a homoerotic Near East has entered Western consciousness [. . .] The presence of same sex relations – however obscured by reticent translators before Sir Richard Burton – has inspired the imaginative *and* actual journeys of a countless number of adept gay or bisexual readers-between-the-lines such as William Beckford, Lord Byron and Pierre Loti, for whom these tales, like the Arabic Orient itself, has always promised an outlet for sexual energies suppressed within homophobic European culture.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Sanders, p133.

¹¹⁷ Michael Slater ‘Dickens in Wonderland’, in *The Arabian Nights in English Literature*, ed. by Peter Caracciolo (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), pp130-142, p133.

¹¹⁸ Muhsin Jassim Ali, *Scheherazade in England* (Washington DC: Three Continents Press, 1981), p120.

¹¹⁹ ‘The Thousand and One Humbugs’, *Household Words*, 21 April 1855, rpt. *Dickens’s Journalism*, III, p292.

¹²⁰ Ali, p120.

¹²¹ Joseph Boone, ‘Rubbing Aladdin’s Lamp’ in *Negotiating Lesbian and Gay Subjects*, ed. by Monika Dorenkamp and Richard Henke (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), pp149-177, pp151-152.

In *Great Expectations* Dickens demonstrates his own participation in this wider queer interpretation of *Arabian Nights*, structuring the emotional and physical intensity of Pip's relationship with Herbert around an imaginative and actual journey to Egypt:

[Herbert] could sketch airy pictures of himself conducting Clara Barley to the land of the Arabian Nights, and of me going out to join them (with a caravan of camels I believe) and of our all going up the Nile and seeing wonders (p416).

Just as the anticipated ultimate departure of Eugene facilitates the most explicit declarations of love between men in Dickens's next novel, Herbert's impending departure to run his company's eastern office in Cairo incites a male crisis of separation, enabling Pip's admission that the loss of Herbert "felt as if [his] last anchor were loosening its hold" (p416). Herbert's leave taking of the man he intimately names 'Handel' permits an even greater revelation of mutual feeling:

'My dear Handel I shall soon have to leave you [. . .] We shall lose a fine opportunity if I put off going to Cairo, and I am very much afraid I must go, Handel, when you most need me.'

'Herbert, I shall always need you, because I shall always love you; but my need is no greater now, than at any other time.'

'You will be so lonely' (p449).

Herbert rightly interprets Pip's emotional reliance on him. Herbert's previous business trip to Marseille permits a similar revelation of Pip's otherwise unspoken feeling: "I was alone, and had a dull sense of being alone [. . .] I sadly missed the cheerful face and ready response of my friend" (p313). These intense avowals at moments of separation cohere with Dickens's wider homoerotic appropriation of the emotional conventions of parting. Herbert leaves for Cairo only after urging Pip to "come to [him]", with reassurances that this is also the ardent desire of his fiancé:

'Clara and I have talked about it again and again,' Herbert pursued, 'and the dear little thing begged me only this evening, with tears in her eyes, to say that if you will live with us when we come together, she will do her best to make you happy, and to convince her husband's friend that he is her friend too. We should get on so well, Handel!' (p450)

William Cohen has emphasised the erotic freight of Herbert's "impulse, almost immediately upon becoming reacquainted with Pip, to christen him 'Handel'" in significant relation to "his own surname, Pocket, the usual receptacle for hands in the novel."¹²² The men's parting permits further emphasis on this suggestive bodily inseparability, as it is made clear that Handel's home is where his Pocket is. After Herbert's departure, Pip returns to their previously shared lodgings: [I] went to my lonely home – if it deserved the name, for it was now no home to me, and I had no home anywhere (p451). Indeed Herbert's choice of "Handel for a familiar name" (p179) that simultaneously encodes their friendship and Pip's better self – "We are so harmonious and you have been a blacksmith" (p178) – also brings this partnership into line with an established Dickens heritage of alliterative male couples who experience homotropics together. Both men have previously fantasised the resolution of their respective financial or emotional embarrassments through emigration. Herbert's dream of evading his debts by "buying a rifle and going to America, with a general idea of compelling buffaloes to make his fortune" (p273) has a darker echo in Pip's longing to flee from Magwitch "and enlist for India as a private soldier" (p338). Here the emotional interdependence of the two men becomes explicit, as neither wish to begin anew in a 'New World' without the support of the other. Pip explicitly acknowledges this mutual emotional reliance, remaining in Britain only because of "the knowledge that Herbert must soon come back" (p338).

Pip, Herbert and Clara finally settle in a triangular cohabitation in Cairo, forming a trio in which Pip's participation is entirely unsanctioned by familial bonds. This home is reminiscent of the domestic threesome enthusiastically effected through intermarriage by Tom and Ruth Pinch with John Westlock in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, who agree that without such a *ménage* "may that house never be." While a business relation between Herbert and Pip operates as ostensible justification, the text firmly signals the queerness of this household. Pip's earlier intuition that Herbert "and his affianced [. . .] had naturally not been very anxious to introduce [him as] a *third person* into their interviews" (p371, emphasis added), clearly flags the unusualness of the final triadic arrangement under which Pip "lived happily with Herbert and his wife" (p480). In Dickens's original ending Pip re-

¹²² Cohen, *Sex Scandal*, p58. Grahame Smith offers an uncomfortably homophobic reading of "the renaming of Pip as Handel by Herbert [as] an echo of Steerforth's more sinister manipulations in calling David Daisy" ['Suppressing Narratives: Childhood and Empire in *The Uncommercial Traveller* and *Great Expectations*', in *Dickens and the Children of Empire*, pp43-53, p50].

visits England after eight years to find Estella married, and we assume beyond the realms of the reported action to return to his domestic contentment in Egypt. The revised, published ending extends Pip's Egyptian life to eleven years, giving it greater significance. This deliberately prolonged, happy bachelordom perhaps adds greater ambiguity to the famously uncertain 'reunion' with Estella. In both versions Pip firmly states his intention not to marry. On Biddy's unspecified insistence that "you must marry", Pip reports Herbert and Clara's similarly vague lip-service to this conventional ideology:

So Herbert and Clara say, but I don't think I shall, Biddy. I have so settled down in their home, that it's not at all likely. I am already quite an old bachelor (p481).

The reference to marriage as institution rather than any potential wife exposes the emptiness of this social proscription, combining suggestively with Pip's participation in the culturally dissident category of 'old bachelorhood' to emphasise his departure from the normative family. This empty marital model reiterates the social compulsion that propels Pip to seek marriage with Biddy, a figure for whom he has previously tried to discipline himself into an appropriate marital enthusiasm:

'If I could only get myself to fall in love with you [. . .] If I could only get myself to do it, *that* would be the thing for me.'

'But you never will, you see,' said Biddy (p131).¹²³

It also echoes the sense of unavoidability apparent in Herbert's apologia to Pip for his engagement, a topic he cautiously introduces under the justification that "the children of not exactly suitable marriages are always most particularly anxious to be married." His fiancé remains an entirely depersonalised figure who is, by implication, no more significant to Herbert than the partners compulsively selected by his child siblings in entirely unerotic alliances: "Little Altick in a frock has already made arrangements for his union with a suitable young person at Kew. And indeed, I think we are all engaged, except the baby" (p251). The humour here does not detract from the unhappy sense of fatality that pervades this bizarre announcement of what was supposed to be the crowning achievement of the domestic novel. Indeed, in language suggestive of erotic deflation, Pip observes that his friend had "become curiously crestfallen and meek, since we had entered on the interesting theme" (p252). Throughout the rest of the novel Clara's 'appeal' to Herbert as someone "so much needing protection" is undermined through similarly negative narration. Pip

¹²³ See also J. M. Léger on Pip's unconvincing "fiction" of desire for Biddy ('The Scrooge in the Closet', p210).

employs litotes to 'endorse' the engagement as one he "would not have undone [. . .] for all the money in the pocket book" (p376).

The final, textually celebrated union of Herbert and Pip in Egypt is in sharp contrast to their extremely unenthusiastic attempts to conform socially through marriage. This continued cohabitation of intimate male friends, despite one's marriage (and that not to his friend's sister!) is unique in Dickens's fiction, and only possible outside the rigidly domestic British homeland. This alternative domestic idyll as lived in Cairo further exposes the limitations of existing interpretations of Dickens's overseas locations:

In Dickens's novels, the colonies and exotic eastern locales like Egypt, India and China are sites, on the one hand, for transported felons, fallen women, debtors and those who cannot make a living in England, or, on the other hand, for single men travelling abroad who retain the option of returning to England.

Colonial and domestic spheres remain carefully separate in all cases.¹²⁴

In *Great Expectations* the exotic locale functions to reveal a deeply homoerotic alternative domesticity. Dickens's relocation of this queer couple to the Orient coheres with his exploration of homoerotic strategies which allow same-sex relationships to be lived within Britain. By using Egypt as queer signifier, Dickens again refuses to banish such love from the text; instead he effectively brings it home into the fabric of the domestic novel. Egypt provides a space for the long-term proximity of Pip and Herbert, whose relationship, the relocation plot suggests, is too emotionally and physically intimate to be domestically accommodated at 'home'.

¹²⁴ Park, p535.

Chapter Five

“It is impossible to be Gentler”: The Homoerotics of Nursing

Queer readings of *Great Expectations* repeatedly argue that Pip’s central male relationships are played out through acts of harm.¹ Such interpretations subscribe to the pervasive homoerotic violence thesis outlined in the introduction to this project. The dominant interpretation of brutality as the primary scene of homoerotic contact has obscured the highly erotic connotations of other, gentler ways of touching. Thus, the positive concomitant of healing through which Pip’s interlocking relations with Herbert, Joe and Magwitch are explored and differentiated, remains critically understated. This chapter focuses on the Victorian sexualisation of nursing, arguing that Dickens deploys this eroticising of nurse/patient roles throughout his fiction to develop more affirmative, tender strategies for articulating same-sex desire.

The Egyptian relocation at the close of *Great Expectations* is prefaced by intensely physical scenes in which Herbert nurses Pip. These repeated restorative acts exert a curative force over the range of homoerotics delineated by the text, allowing a homotropic reading of the type that Cohen had feared the proliferation of fisticuffs would circumvent:

Pip’s pugilistics with Herbert, Drummle and Orlick (as well as Magwitch’s with Compeyson) represent a form of contact too close for comfort: however ecstatically and erotically charged one may suspect these passages of being, the form they take – of increasingly savage violence – must sit uneasily with any cheerfully homotropic reading.²

Cohen does observe in the later friendship of Pip and Herbert that the novel allows for a “now far gentler touching” which “can be more frankly denoted.”³ He briefly describes the “bodywork” that Herbert (who has developed “the peculiar knack [. . .] for tending to Pip’s hands”) performs on his friend.⁴ Cohen sees this more frank denotation of gentle touching as an index of the greater suppression of eros, viewing physical “tending” as part of a

¹ See Sedgwick on Orlick’s “lurking, skulking, following in the rear of other men”, especially Pip (*Between Men*, p132); Cohen on Magwitch’s initially paedophilic “man-handling of Pip” (*Sex Scandal*, p59); Léger on the flagellatory erotics that structure Pip’s relationship with Joe (‘The Scrooge in the Closet’, chapters two and four).

² Cohen, p54.

³ Ibid., p59.

⁴ Ibid., p58.

process through which “youthful belligerence is rehabilitated as properly sublimated, adult male homosociality.”⁵ This chapter, however, posits nursing as a *more* culturally visible form of erotic contact than fisticuffs. Drawing on contemporaneous sociocultural concerns about the gendered erotics of nursing, it is argued that the sickbed offers similar imaginative possibilities to those presented by homotropical locations, as a culturally eroticised realm conceptually distanced from the ‘everyday’. The socio-cultural erotic significance of practices of both nursing and emigration allow both to operate as strategies for positive homoerotic articulation in Dickens’s fiction. Throughout Dickens’s novels same-sex nursing operates as a central, reiterated behaviour through which both male and female characters legitimate their physical contact and express their excitement at such intimate touching.

In *Great Expectations* fisticuffs are immediately displaced by Herbert’s particular predilection for nursing Pip. Even in their initial pugilistic encounter Herbert is more concerned with healing than harming his adversary. Pip reminisces that in this fight Herbert “seemed to have no strength, and he never once hit me hard” (p92). Indeed, Herbert proves himself most efficient as a sponge boy, promptly providing “a bottle of water and a sponge dipped in vinegar. ‘Available for both’” (p91). Later, when Pip is badly burnt, Herbert readily transposes this caring role into their adult relationship. Drawing on his aptitude for bodily treatment he becomes “the kindest of nurses”, blending efficiency with “tenderness”:

[A]t stated times [he] took off the bandages, and steeped them in the cooling liquid that was kept ready, and put them on again, with a patient tenderness that I was deeply grateful for (p404) .

Throughout this chapter, Dickens places increasing emphasis on the gentle physicality of Herbert’s nursing; a bodily contact interspersed with, and ostensibly sanctioned by, a vocal exchange about the men’s respective ‘love interests’. This alleged heterosexual interest is repeatedly interrupted by tender exchanges between the two men. Herbert’s comment about the need to “take care” of his fiancé, for instance, is immediately followed by his actual bodily care of Pip:

How can I take care of the dear child otherwise? – Lay your arm out upon

⁵ Ibid.

the back of the sofa, my dear boy, and I'll sit down here, and get the bandage off so gradually that you shall not know when it comes. I was speaking of Provis (p405).

The slippage between wife and friend is further emphasised by Herbert's similar naming of them as "the dear child" and "my dear boy." The greater intimacy of the possessive formulation applied to Pip again points to the erotic dynamic of this "bachelor marriage." Herbert's relation of Provis's history, which Pip recognises as the back-story of Estella's parentage, provides the frame for two competing interpretations of Pip's reaction to this simultaneous revelation of his own flesh and revelation of Estella's blood line. Herbert's bed-side story while he nurses is repeatedly punctuated by physical responses from Pip, who "shrink[s]," "breathe[s] quickly" and is "rather excited" (pp405-407). Pip insistently attributes his bodily reactions to the narrative, disavowing the physical effect of his intimate contact with Herbert: "'Does it strike too cold on that sensitive place?' 'I don't feel it'" (p406). Herbert, however, provides an alternative explanation in his repeated intuition that Pip's "sensitive place[s]" are reacting to his treatment:

'My poor Handel, I hurt you!'

'It is impossible to be gentler, Herbert' (p406).

Pip typically subsumes this physical acknowledgement under his desire for narrative, partially veiling this deeply intimate admission with further questions: "'Yes? What else?'"

The heterosexual interest ostensibly behind Pip's feverish physical excitement paradoxically provides extra opportunities for otherwise illicit male touching:

Herbert bent forward to look at me more nearly, as if my reply had been rather more hurried or more eager than he could quite account for.

'Your head is cool?' he said, touching it (p405).

Pip clearly desires more of the same, oscillating between repudiating and seeking Herbert's touch. He quickly orchestrates an exactly parallel scene of scrutiny followed by contact, re-invoking his heated eagerness as the rationale:

'Look at me.'

'I do look at you, my dear boy.'

'Touch me.'

'I do touch you, my dear boy' (p407).

This restorative, erotically connotative touching and looking is re-enacted in a further scene of nursing between the two men, when Herbert rescues Pip from Orlick's malevolent grasp:

I saw my supporter to be –

'Herbert! Great Heaven!'

'Softly,' said Herbert. 'Gently, Handel. Don't be too eager' (p430).

Once again, Pip exhibits excessive eagerness at Herbert's physical support. This scene prefaces yet another spate of nursing, in which Herbert improvises bandages (p430) and acquires medicine for Pip (p432), with the assistance of Startop, who plays the role of auxiliary nurse. Nursing justifies the tender touching of Herbert and Pip, whilst providing a framework for Pip's expression of excitement at such contact.

In the prioritising of healing over violence as erotic mode, *Great Expectations* reworks Dickens's much earlier exploration of inter-male nursing in *Nicholas Nickleby*. The action of this earlier novel largely derives from Nicholas's refusal to watch Smike being beaten: "I would help and aid you, not bring fresh sorrow on you as I have done here" (p149):

The unhappy being had established a hold upon his sympathy and compassion, which made his heart ache at the prospect of the suffering he was destined to undergo (p154).

Nicholas intervenes to cut short Squeers's malicious beating, the first blow of which has Smike "wincing from the lash and uttering a scream of pain" (p156). Nicholas's refusal to "stand by and see it done" – "Wretch [. . .] touch him at you peril!" – is the catalyst for his exclusive, tender care of Smike throughout the rest of the novel. The men's escape from Dotheboys Hall allows Nicholas to provide Smike with much needed emotional and physical attention. Smike attempts to reciprocate, combining his appreciation of Nicholas's body (discussed in chapter three) with solicitude about his physical wellbeing:

'You grow' said the lad, laying his hand timidly on that of Nicholas,

'you grow thinner every day; your cheek is pale, and your eye more sunk.

Indeed I cannot bear to see you so, and think how I am burdening you' (p231).

The mutual physical attentiveness of these male friends is underscored by the casting of Smike in a medical role in the Crummles's production of *Romeo and Juliet*. After his debut performance "Smike was pronounced unanimously, alike by audience and actors, the very prince and prodigy of Apothecaries" (p318).

Nicholas and Smike's unceasing physical tenderness for one another is drawn out in the highly intimate scenes of bodily care that punctuate Douglas McGrath's 2002 film adaptation. In the director's overview McGrath speaks of his interpretation of Nicholas and Smike's relationship as the central theme of the novel and "the heart of the movie", outlining his production decision to film scenes between them in two-shot, rather than in separate close-ups, to "show the bond, the unity between them."⁶ He describes Smike's declaration to Nicholas, "You are my home", as "the most important line in the entire script", and selects Charlie Hunnam's performance of Nicholas's anguish at Smike's increasing illness as his most "lovely and tender" scene: "The person he's come to love the most, or to feel the very closest to, is in peril, and that puts his whole composure and his whole happiness in peril." McGrath's prioritising of this relationship over the 'romantic' attachment between Nicholas and Madeline is admirably faithful to Dickens's text. Indeed, in the novel Nicholas's rescue of Madeline from her arranged marriage is immediately overshadowed by his sustained care of the deteriorating Smike, whom he removes to the country. This rural relocation creates an exclusive, idyllic site of male nursing. Notably no female carers accompany them from London or are mentioned in their country retreat. Nicholas himself appears to take sole care of his ailing friend, initially driving or walking with him to favourite spots and later wheeling or carrying him into the orchard:

He had brought Smike out in his arms – poor fellow! A child might have carried him then – to see the sunset, and, having arranged his couch, had taken his seat beside it. He had been watching the whole of the night before, and being greatly fatigued both in mind and body, gradually fell asleep (p713).

These practical details of Nicholas's night watching and resulting exhaustion combine with descriptions of him taking "his old place by the bedside" (p715) to create a picture of his assiduous nursing care of his friend.

"A Highly Eroticised Figure": The Cultural Sexualisation of Victorian Nursing

Such laying on of hands comprises multiple social transgressions; it permits male/male contact, but only through a reversal of a strictly (albeit imaginatively) gendered practice of medical care that carried a heavy, contemporary freight of erotic connotation and was

⁶ Audio Commentary with Douglas McGrath, (Director), *Nicholas Nickleby* (2002, collector's edition DVD, 2004).

subject to severe scrutiny throughout the period of Dickens's career. Catherine Judd documents the sexual concerns that surrounded nursing, both before and after Victorian nursing reforms:

'Nightingale' or 'new-style' nurses were created in the mid-nineteenth century in part to counteract what was seen as the renegade sexual transgressions of the 'old-style' pauper or working-class nurses [. . .] Due to the focus on the working-class nurses' supposedly 'dangerous' sexuality, claims about the ostensible purity and asexuality for the new-style or 'saintly' nurse were crucial elements within the mid Victorian nursing reform movement. However [. . .] the saintly nurse was in and of herself a highly eroticised figure, and Victorian writers and reformers remained at least tacitly aware of the inherent eroticism contained in representations of the 'saintly' new-style nurse.⁷

Judd traces a long literary history of eroticised female nursing, bolstering examples of libertine usage with a more conventional novelistic tradition, which takes in works such as Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767), a work that Dickens enjoyed.⁸ She argues that the conceptual weight of such a tradition meant that "the 'purity' of the pious, middle-class nurse [was] undermined continually by a variety of conventional erotic associations."⁹ Indeed, critics have confidently applied such "conventional erotic

⁷ Catherine Judd, *Bedside Seductions: Nursing and the Victorian Imagination, 1830-1880* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp33-34.

⁸ Ibid., pp42-43. For details of Dickens's reading of, and influence by Sterne see *Companion*, p551.

⁹ Judd, *Bedside Seductions*, p44. Judd's careful collection of data to demonstrate the sexual anxieties surrounding nursing from 1829-1880, neatly historicises a broader cultural eroticisation of nursing that persists to date. A short 1983 piece exploring popular imaginings of nursing concludes that sex and intimacy persist as major metaphors for nursing:

Nursing is a metaphor for intimacy. Nurses are involved in the most private aspects of people's lives, and they cannot hide behind technology or a veil of omniscience. Nurses do for others publicly what healthy persons do for themselves privately. Nurses, as trusted peers, are there to hear secrets, especially the ones born of vulnerability [. . .] Nursing is a metaphor for sex. Having seen and touched the bodies of strangers, nurses are perceived as willing and able sexual partners. Knowing and experienced, they, unlike prostitutes, are thought to be safe [Claire Fagin and Donna Diers, 'Nursing as Metaphor', *American Journal of Nursing* September 1983, p1362].

Leslie Fiedler reinforces this conceptual link between nursing and prostitution in his analysis of the erotic treatment of nursing in popular culture: "Nurses preside at the bedsides of males – privileged, even required, unlike other members of their sex except for prostitutes, to touch, handle, manipulate the naked flesh of males [. . .] In the popular arts, nurses are typically portrayed as pursued by or pursuing patients, making passes at or being approached by interns or residents" ['Images of the Nurse in Fiction and Popular Culture' in *Images of Nurses: Perspectives from History, Art and Literature*, ed. by Anne Hudson Jones (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1988), pp100-112, pp101-102]. Reflecting persistent representations of the nurse as pursued, current US slang includes the phrase 'the Nightingale effect' to refer to the phenomenon of patients falling in love with their nurses (see discussion on VICTORIA, October 2003).

associations” to ‘decode’ the only very lightly veiled sexual nuances in literary depictions of *female* nursing of *male* patients. John Wiltshire, for example, details the paradox that bodily care both exposes and sanctions heterosexual desire in Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* (1818):

Nursing concern for the body becomes the permissible vehicle in which awakening (or latent) desire can find a plausible and socially sanctioned, because apparently sexually neutral expression.¹⁰

However, the implications of this logic for same-sex nursing have gone largely unobserved. This critical omission parallels the sexual double standard perpetuated in readings of food as an eroticised oral exchange *only* when the actors are a man and a woman.¹¹

Miriam Bailin offers a more inclusive list of nursing couples in Dickens’s fiction. Beginning with the pre- and post-marital nursing of Eugene Wrayburn and Lizzie Hexam, Arthur Clennam and Little Dorrit, Dick Swiveller and the Marchioness, Bailin goes on to detail more diverse healing partnerships such as that between Pip and Joe, and Martin Chuzzlewit and Mark Tapley.¹² Bailin reads the ideal sickroom as a microcosm of the ideal home, positioning Dickens at the centre of this contemporary domestication of scenes of care:

Sweet smelling, orderly, companionable, peaceful, and remote from worldly care and want, Dickens’s sickrooms resemble those encountered in Victorian fiction generally, though at times surpassing them in the particularly Dickensian degree of their coziness and conviviality.¹³

Bailin seems unaware of the embedded paradox here, failing to recognise that the sickrooms, and indeed sickbeds, shared by these male duos signal significant deviation from the essential heterocentrism of the conventional Victorian home.¹⁴ Bailin does, however, recognise the erotics of Dickensian nursing, in a strictly heterosexual context. She observes “the equivocal status of the sickroom as both domestic refuge and privileged locale of bodily intimacy”, examining Dickens’s effort to forestall “possible suggestions of

¹⁰ John Wiltshire, *Jane Austen and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), p173.

¹¹ See the discussion of the same-sex erotics of food in chapter three.

¹² Miriam Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), p79.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p80.

¹⁴ In this unrecognised paradox, Bailin’s continued insistence on conventional Dickensian ‘coziness’ parallels that of Margaret Lane, who recognises nothing incongruous in her positioning of the hearthside pairing of Eugene and Mortimer as exemplifying Dickensian domesticity (see discussion in chapter two).

dalliance” by emphasising the ‘innocence’ of scenes such as Little Dorrit’s nursing of Arthur Clennam.¹⁵

Nursing, then, is a major metaphor for erotic contact in nineteenth-century fiction more widely, and in Dickens’s own novels operates as an explicit index to the growing, pre-coital intimacy of pre-marital couples such as Arthur Clennam and Little Dorrit, and Dick Swiveller and the Marchioness.¹⁶ Such bodily care is similarly the central physical medium through which emotional and erotic same-sex contact is made throughout Dickens’s fiction.

An explicit referent for the manner in which illness could facilitate otherwise prohibited same-sex intimacy is presented through Pip’s gladness at Magwitch’s removal into the prison infirmary: “This gave me opportunities of being with him that I could not otherwise have had” (p455). Similarly, Pip’s fever movingly reunites him with Joe, enabling intimate physicality between them as they become literal bedfellows in Pip’s sickbed: “Joe had actually laid his head down on the pillow at my side and put his arm round my neck, in his joy that I knew him” (p463). J. M. Léger moves towards an unusually homocentric reading in his interpretation of Joe’s care for the delirious Pip as a context “by means of which they are able to connect intimately and to rewrite the negative connections of Pip and Magwitch and of Pip and Mrs Joe in the first two chapters of the novel.”¹⁷ Whilst Léger intuits a more positive treatment of male-male erotics in Dickens’s fiction, “which threatens violence as a means of establishing homocentric and encoding homoerotic connection”, he repeatedly returns to bodily harm (here, specifically a Marcusian reliance on flagellatory Victorian porn) as the most legible site of homoerotics.¹⁸ Thus the eros of a gentler touching between Pip and Joe is *only* observable on the back of their earlier experience as “fellow sufferers” of abuse at the hands of Mrs Joe.¹⁹ Léger’s thesis reads as a case study of how the ‘iron

¹⁵ Bailin, p103.

¹⁶ The significance of the theme of male nursing in nineteenth-century literature has received no previous critical attention. However, contemporary novels where all male sick-room action is central to the plot include Charlotte Yonge’s *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853) involving male fever transfer between nurse and patient; Charles Read’s *Hard Cash* that appeared in *All the Year Round* in 1863 and depicts sailors nursing one another; Wilkie Collins’s *Armada* (1866), which follows a potentially fatal friendship founded on medical and emotional care; and George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876) in which the protagonist forfeits success at Cambridge to coach and tend his ailing best friend Hans Meyrick.

¹⁷ Léger, p202.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p200.

¹⁹ “The homoerotic is obviously encoded as flagellatory abuse by the masculinized mother, but the male parent/lover is exonerated because he is also the abused” (*ibid.*, p196).

ring' of the homoerotic violence thesis is repeatedly passed forward. Despite his striving towards a more homocentric reading of Dickens, Léger is firmly locked into a focus on "a masochism that Dickens's age assumed was inextricable from homoerotic desire, as in the flagellation fantasy."²⁰ Thus, under Léger's violent focus, Joe's positive and visibly eroticised shift from suffering to healing is underemphasised.

Léger does note that fever functions to reveal the extent of Pip's otherwise silenced connection to Joe:

As Pip emerges from the amorphous consciousness of delirium, his self-consciousness crystallizes with the ability to question the apparition of another man which has, without threat or violence, penetrated his amorphous perceptions, making everything and everyone he imagined seem 'sooner or later to settle down into the likeness of Joe.'²¹

In enabling the revelation of conventionally concealed male love, Pip's repeated feverish 'ramblings' – "*Is it Joe?*" (p463) – work here to enable a crossing of the borders of normative behaviour. Fever can be seen as the limit case in which the transgressive potential of the sickroom – as equivocal 'domestic' space and marginal site between the ultimate life/death boundary – is brought to the boil. Jane Wood theorises delirium in Victorian fiction as creating "a liminal domain where the laws and codes which fix consciousness in the material present are temporarily suspended":

As a narrative device, delirium enables revelations and transformations that would seem implausible in realist plot. Hidden structures of relations and connections between mental life and the material world become accessible through the unlikely agency of afflictions characterised by derangement of the faculties.²²

Thus literary fever operates to expose the 'other country' of the mind, revealing otherwise undisclosed mental terrain through the mode of suspended social responsibility. In this, it parallels the homoerotic potential offered by the fantasised otherness of geographical terra incognita.

²⁰ Ibid., p176.

²¹ Ibid., p199.

²² Jane Wood, *Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), p113.

Pip and Joe's relationship encompasses a variety of Dickens's strategies for more positive representations of same-sex desire. They are legal brothers-in-law (Joe emphasises his interest in caring for Pip in his marriage proposal to Georgiana Pirrip) who attain physical connection through the socially eroticised medium of nursing.²³ Whilst Pip and Joe undoubtedly present an important example of Dickens's more affirmative exploration of inter-male erotics, the difference between this scene of nursing and Herbert's constant commitment to physical care for Pip demonstrates the nuanced presentation of such desire in line with a Sedgwickian continuum along which male bonds are more or less eroticised.

This spectrum of care-giving has a female equivalent in *Bleak House*, which similarly dramatises emotional and erotic bonds through the central incident of the protagonist's debilitating illness. The assortment of (would-be) attendants that cluster at Esther's sick-bed call attention to the variety of inter-female relationships explored in the novel. These range from the mutual healing of Esther and the young servant Charley, to the highly eroticised reunion of Esther and Ada after Esther's convalescence.²⁴ As suggested in chapter two's exploration of this intimate reunion scene, Esther's illness functions finally to break down physical boundaries between herself and Ada. Similarly when Caddy Turveydrop (née Jellyby) becomes seriously unwell – she has previously been another eager aspirant to Esther's sickroom who is denied admittance despite her “coming and going early and late” (p559) – her illness allows her to enjoy an intimacy with Esther, which she has craved to relive throughout the novel. On their first meeting Esther cushions Caddy as she sleeps – “I contrived to raise her head so that it should rest on my lap” (p63) – beginning a passion in Caddy for her “best friend”, whom (she feels) “nobody can respect and love [. . .] too much” (p374). Indeed Caddy's admiration is so intense that Esther considers herself as a rival to Caddy's husband: “Caddy, who had not seen me since her wedding day was so glad and so affectionate that I was half inclined to fear I should make her husband jealous” (p609). When Caddy sickens Esther intuitively that her particular presence is Caddy's best medicine, and goes daily “to sit with her” (p769) for “eight or nine” weeks, often “remain[ing] to nurse her” at night (p771):

²³ Léger offers a detailed exploration of the erotics between Joe and Pip in chapter four of his thesis. He focuses on the novel's repeated insistence on the equality and contemporaneity of the two males: Joe “shares a love with the [quasi] son which is not abusive, but lest it be seen as pederastic he insists that they are contemporaries and the son insists that the father is but a large child” (p196).

²⁴ For more on the untrained, but life-preserving nursing of Esther and Charley see Laura Fasick, *Professional Men and Domesticity in the Mid-Victorian Novel* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), pp107-108.

Caddy had a superstition about me, which had been strengthening in her mind ever since that night long ago, when she had lain asleep with her head in my lap. She almost – I think I must say quite – believed that I did her good whenever I was near her. Now, although this was such a fancy of the affectionate girl's, that I am almost ashamed to mention it, still it might have all the force of a fact when she was really ill (p769).

Happily Caddy recovers under the assiduous care of the woman that she admires and adores beyond her own husband.

Though less developed as a strategy for expressing inter-female erotics, the sickbed in Dickens does provide the setting for a variety of eroticised meetings between women.²⁵ Little Dorrit visits Pet's bedroom in a therapeutic capacity – "I came to ask if you were better, and if I could do anything for you" – and appears to Pet to "have so much of the air of a kind nurse" (p429). This meeting, at which the women cuddle up under Pet's garments, precipitates Amy Dorrit's absolute complicity with Clennam's erotic love for Pet.

"But for him, I must have died abroad": *Martin Chuzzlewit* and the Hidden History of Victorian Male Nursing

At this Swiss sickbed, Amy Dorrit and Pet experience a double erotic freedom, in which bedroom intimacy is simultaneously permitted by Pet's incapacity and the foreign location. Pip and Herbert similarly experience the parallel homoerotic liberation culturally available in both sickroom and homotropical locale. In this they continue a long association of same-sex nursing and foreign travel or relocation, which is explored throughout Dickens's career. In *Pickwick* both emigrant pairs are associated with the illness that was a typical

²⁵ Terry Castle points to the erotics of nursing between women in Cassandra Austen's loving care of her sister. Castle offers a homoerotic interpretation of Cassandra's role as "caretaker of Jane Austen's mind and body" (*Sister, Sister*, p6). Indeed Jane Austen's later letters dilate somewhat hyperbolically on the quality of care she received: "As for my sister! words must fail me in any attempt to describe what a nurse she has been to me"; "Aunt Cassandra nursed me so beautifully!"; "If you are ever ill, may you be as tenderly nursed as I have been" (*Letters*, 22 May 1817 to Anne Sharp, p340; 20/21 February to Fanny Knight, p329; 27 May 1817 to James Edward Austen, p342). Poignantly, in her final extant letter Austen describes Cassandra as "my dearest sister, my tender, watchful, indefatigable nurse" (*Letters*, 28/29 May 1817 to France Tilson [?], p343).

concomitant to travel to ‘the frontier’.²⁶ Job anticipates the health risks of life in the Caribbean, fearing that Jingle could be “carried off by the fever” (p703), while in Demerara medical students Ben and Bob “each had the yellow fever fourteen times” (p753). In *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844) Dickens was to develop these brief references into a thorough exploration of the camaraderie and support between men that was central to survival in perilous overseas locations.

Dickens would have been particularly aware of the benefits of good health when writing *Martin Chuzzlewit* after his miserable affliction on voyages across the Atlantic. In *American Notes* Dickens offers a hyperbolic account of his suffering, describing himself as “excessively sea-sick”: “Not sea-sick, be it understood, in the ordinary acceptance of the term: I wish I had been: but in a form which I have never seen or heard described.”²⁷ Dickens’s particular concern with health after this experience is apparent in his inclusion, in the travelogue, of an impassioned call for legislation to ensure a medical attendant on cross-Atlantic ships. He hoped that this would alleviate the “sickness of adults, and deaths of children on the passage”, which he had observed as “matters of the very commonest occurrence.”²⁸ Dickens was never entirely robust in health; he recounted that he was a “delicate” child “soon hurt, bodily or mentally”, and suffered throughout his life from “violent spasmodic attacks.”²⁹ Ackroyd suggests a very plausible psychological dimension to these attacks, which have been variously put down to kidney stones, renal colic or epilepsy: “In Dickens’s case, these youthful spasms or fits of agony seem frequently to have occurred at times of crisis or anxiety.”³⁰ In the autobiographical fragment printed in Forster’s biography, Dickens recounts enduring a particularly acute instance of his “old attacks of spasm” when working at Warren’s Blacking factory as a child:

Bob Fagin was very good to me on the occasion of a bad attack of my old disorder. I suffered such excruciating pain that time, that they made a temporary bed of straw in my old recess in the counting-house, and I rolled about on the floor, and Bob filled empty blacking-bottles with hot water

²⁶ Aldrich qualifies his celebration of the erotic possibilities of the colonies, acknowledging that the prevalence of tropical hazards and potentially fatal diseases meant that such locations were “not homosexual paradise” (*Colonialism*, p408).

²⁷ Dickens, *American Notes*, p13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p224.

²⁹ Ackroyd, p68, p49.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p50.

and applied relays of them to my side half the day. I got better, and quite cosy towards evening, but Bob (who was much bigger and older than I) did not like the idea of my going home alone, and took me under his protection.³¹

Dickens's reaction to what he viewed as a forced companionship with Bob and the other boys labouring at the blacking warehouse has always been read as one of great shame, worked out through the attribution of Bob's surname to one of his most unpalatable figures: "Although it seems that even by Dickens's own account Bob Fagin was gentle and considerate to him, his very presence evoked a horror greater than any gratitude Dickens might have felt – the horror of being part of the poor."³² Buckton reads Dickens's accounts of the blacking factory as a discourse of shame deriving from the "'low' company in which he had been observed", "the companionship he has [had] to endure" and "the unsettling intimacy of male bodies with which it [. . . was] associated."³³ However, the physical intimacy that Dickens experienced under the protective Bob's gentle attentions to his suffering body is given a more positive reincarnation in the many depictions of tender male nursing in Dickens's fiction.

Having survived a bilious sea voyage, Mark Tapley and the younger Martin Chuzzlewit set up home in another exemplary site of sickness. Through mutual nursing these men are able to save one another from the fatal pestilence of Eden. The tenderness of this (yet another!) alliterative pair in the 'New World' (anti-) paradise has a suggestive resonance with more explicitly homoeroticised locations. Sanders notes that "Eden was almost certainly based on Cairo, Illinois. 'Dismal Cairo' appears in *American Notes* as a 'hotbed of disease, an ugly sepulchre.'"³⁴ Indeed this seems very likely, given Dickens's repeated horrified references to this location, which he also describes as "the detestable morass called Cairo" and "ill-fated Cairo" in the travelogue.³⁵ On their return, Mark reinforces this oblique link between locations, describing "the Atlantic ocean and the Red Sea [as] being, in that respect, all one" (p619). A veiled Egyptian referent operates (albeit at two removes) in this episode that combines the liminal behaviours of mutual male emigration and nursing.

³¹ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 3 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1872-74), I, p40.

³² Ackroyd, p78.

³³ Buckton, 'The Reader Whom I Love', p196.

³⁴ Sanders, p141.

³⁵ *American Notes*, p187, p246.

Dickens was particularly appalled by the fetid and often fatal conditions that settlers around the Mississippi had to endure. He visited a woman in “this blighted place” who had watched “her children, one by one, die here of fever, in the full prime and beauty of their life.”³⁶ The centrality of Dickens’s concern with public health is demonstrated in the final remarks of *American Notes*, which focus on the need for “common precautions” to avoid unnecessary illness in a country of “so many great rivers, and such opposite varieties of climate.”³⁷ Linda Sabin has recently explored the range of male nursing practised in this Mississippi region during the nineteenth-century. She documents the work of the Howard Association, founded in the early 1830s to give relief during the numerous epidemics. Members would “organise relief, hire nurses, and in many cases give temporary nursing care themselves.”³⁸ Sabin records the mutual nursing undertaken by male volunteers who cared for one another as they also sickened in the 1843 yellow fever epidemic at Rodney, Mississippi. It is likely that Dickens would have been familiar with such organisations, making Eden/Cairo the perfect, feverish site for the reciprocal care of Mark and Martin.

On Dickens’s travels in both America and on the Continent he encountered instances of unofficial and more organised male nursing. In the prison at Philadelphia he witnessed male inmates nursing one another: “Some two or three had prisoners nurses with them, for they were very sick; and one, a fat old negro whose leg had been taken off within the jail had for his attendant a classical scholar and an accomplished surgeon, himself a prisoner likewise.”³⁹ This use of the prison population to nurse one another was similar to the practice employed in sex-segregated institutions in Britain at this time.⁴⁰ Dickens would have been familiar with the few remaining English sites of male nursing from his visits to institutions such as prisons and workhouses. During the nineteenth century men were increasingly pushed to the margins of nursing in Britain. As Carolyn Mackintosh observes,

³⁶ Ibid., p186.

³⁷ *American Notes*, p251.

³⁸ Linda Sabin, ‘Unheralded Nurses: Male Care Givers in the Nineteenth Century South’, *Nursing History Review*, 5 (1997), pp131-148, p134.

³⁹ *American Notes*, pp103-104. *Pictures from Italy* includes accounts of various nursing fraternities. Dickens describes the Cappucini Monks as “the best friends of the people. They seem to mingle with them more immediately, as their counsellors and comforters, and to go among them more when they are sick” (p296). Similarly, he records that one of the “commonest offices” of secular, egalitarian “brotherhood”, Campagnia della Misericordia, was “to attend and console the sick.” Members of this fraternity also administered to victims of accidents: “their office is to raise the sufferer and bear him tenderly to hospital” (p431).

⁴⁰ See Carolyn Mackintosh, ‘A Historical Study of Men in Nursing’, *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 26.2 (1997), pp232-236.

mid Victorian nursing reforms “allowed no room for male participation in nursing within the general or voluntary hospital sector”:

The inherent assumption underpinning this new nursing was that it was ‘natural’ for nursing to be performed by females, and this view dominated the subsequent ethos of the occupation, with the wider social concerns of creating an acceptable and respectable work role for middle-class Victorian females further fuelling the femininity. The foundation of nurses homes, primarily as respectable refuges for the modest Victorian female, further isolated these nurses and acted as another physical barrier to exclude males.⁴¹

Although, as Mackintosh argues, “men have had a place in nursing for as long as records are available”, “their contribution has been perceived as negligible, largely because of the dominant influence that the nineteenth-century female nursing movement has had on the occupation’s historical ideology.”⁴² Florence Nightingale was central to the construction of this ideology. Although in her *Notes on Nursing: What It is and What it is Not* (1859) she rigorously challenged the idea of a natural, untrained female aptitude for nursing, providing guidance on “the proper use of fresh air, light, warmth, cleanliness, quiet” etc., she firmly gendered such provision: “Every woman is a nurse.”⁴³ Indeed, in her critique of military hospitals, Nightingale strongly implied that male was precisely what nursing “is not” or should not be:

I solemnly declare that I have seen or known of fatal accidents, such as suicides in *delirum tremens*, bleedings to death, dying patients dragged out of bed by drunken Medical Staff corps men, and many other things less patent and striking, which would not have happened in London civil hospitals nursed by women. [. . .] Were a trustworthy *man* in charge of each ward [. . .] the thing would not, in all probability have happened. But were a trustworthy *woman* in charge of the ward, or set of wards,

⁴¹ Ibid., p233. John Green provides a concise history of the exclusion and reluctantly permitted entry of men into professional nursing bodies from the late nineteenth century [‘Men in Nursing and the Royal College of Nursing’, *History of Nursing Society Journal*, 4.1 (1992-3), pp3-8].

⁴² Mackintosh, p232. For a history of male nursing in ecclesiastical movements (such as those observed by Dickens in Italy) and in the hospitals of the Byzantine Empire see Vern Bullough, ‘Men in Nursing’, *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 10.5 (1995), p267.

⁴³ Florence Nightingale, *Notes on Nursing: What it is and What it is Not* (London: Duckworth, 1970), p6, preface.

the thing would not, in all certainty have happened.⁴⁴

This was certainly not an unchallenged view; it was contested by a variety of contemporary accounts (discussed later in this chapter) that represented the sympathy and efficiency of male nurses. However, the femininity of nursing became the dominant ideology, as for a variety of highly laudable reasons Nightingale “and her allies and successors pushed nursing as a profession particularly suitable for women, because they were ‘natural’ caregivers and healers.” As Vern Bullough goes on to argue, “such arguments helped women break through the male monopolies of power and establish what came to be regarded as a woman’s profession. It is important to remember, however, that this was a nineteenth-century construct, and nursing was not always so regarded.”⁴⁵ While various commentators acknowledge that from the 1850s ‘new’ Nightingale-style nurses gradually replaced male orderlies in military hospitals, their gendered interest is always in these ‘new’ women.⁴⁶ Attention to the way that nursing reforms enabled a professionalisation of a (largely) female work force has meant that there is almost no research into the histories of all the male orderlies, corps men and attendants who performed nursing duties before and alongside the ‘new’ nurse in both general and military hospitals as well as dominating the profession in asylums.⁴⁷

The exploration of male nursing in *Martin Chuzzlewit* is highly appropriate given the novel’s simultaneous concern with corporeality and with a wide range of variously eroticised male bonds. Participating in the increasing fascination with embodiment in Victorian studies, various recent commentators have observed that this novel’s “fictional landscape is filled with bodies, often dismembered or fragmented.”⁴⁸ Lougy reads *Martin Chuzzlewit* as a subversive Bakhtinian assault on the integrity of an “entirely finished,

⁴⁴ Ibid., p23.

⁴⁵ Vern Bullough, ‘Men, Women, and Nursing History’, *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 10.3 (1994), p127.

⁴⁶ See Judd, p160; Fiedler, p102 and Alison Bashford *Purity and Pollution: Gender Embodiment and Victorian Medicine* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp93-94.

⁴⁷ Judd briefly acknowledges this enormous omission (p160). On the proliferation of men in asylum nursing see Mackintosh, p238.

⁴⁸ Lougy, ‘Repressive and Expressive Forms’, p39. Davidoff and Hall summarise the recent rise of studies in which “the realm of the body has become a prime site of sociological as well as historical investigation” in their new preface to *Family Fortunes* (2002, pxxxiii). Dickens’s fiction has proved to be a particularly rewarding site of fleshy scrutiny, giving rise to the cyborgian interpretations of Newsom, Joseph and Sussman, discussed in chapter one, and to a range of cultural phenomenology approaches. For exploration of the critical opportunities and limitations of an “attention to corporeal ‘micropractices’ and the experiential dimension of the body” in Dickens’s fiction see William Cohen, ‘Interiors: Sex and the Body in Dickens’, *Critical Survey*, 17.2 (2005), forthcoming, and Anne Schwan’s response, ‘The Limitations of a Somatics of Resistance: Sexual Performativity and Gender Dissidence in Dickens’s *Dombey and Son*’, in the same issue.

completed, strictly limited body” and Bowen sees it as “a text persistently troubled by the limits of the human, by people who may be monsters or animals or machines.”⁴⁹ The Martin/Mark dyad is part of an interconnecting set of extreme male attachments explored against this fleshy canvas of a novel that also devotes considerable attention to Martin’s relationship with Tom Pinch, and Tom’s own prolonged domestic intimacy with John Westlock.⁵⁰

The ostensibly selfless Mark Tapley enlists himself in Martin’s service, when Martin is at his lowest ebb. Though the novel provides a variety of explanations for Mark’s attention to Martin, they uniformly fail to convince. As Barickman et al observe, “Tapley’s ‘humour’, the idea that marriage to Mrs Lupin would be so pleasant that he could take no credit for his cheerfulness, is another contrivance to avoid the perils of traditional sexual roles and rituals in this society.”⁵¹ Mark abandons the conventional domestic comforts offered by Mrs Lupin to follow Martin, endeavouring to justify Martin’s magnetic effect on him through recourse to normative romance structures. However, Mark’s chivalrous resolve to deserve Mary Graham’s commendation through good service to her beloved fails to satisfy, only placing a further strain on the fiction of Mary as provoking the ‘normative’ desires of all those men whose primary commitments are evidently to other men (p235).⁵² Indeed the explanation that Mark offers to Martin clearly dramatises his under-motivation: “Here I am with a liking for what is venturesome, and a liking for you, and a wish to come out strong

⁴⁹ Lougy, p39; Bowen, ‘Other Dickens’, p211.

⁵⁰ As discussed in chapter three, Dickens allows Tom and John to form the most effective in-law bond of his canon. The novel also gives some, briefer, attention to love between women. Mercy Chuzzlewit (née Pecksniff) finds an emotional and physical haven from her abusive husband in the love of her “best friend” Mrs Todgers (p551), who has herself been abandoned by her husband in favour of the ‘bachelor’ pleasures of “foreign countries” (p134):

But in some odd nook of Mrs Todgers’s breast, up a great many steps, and in a corner easy to be overlooked, there was a secret door, with ‘Woman’ written upon the spring, which at a touch from Mercy’s hand had flown wide open, and admitted her for shelter (p551).

In his valorisation of Mrs Todgers’s response to Mercy, Dickens celebrates the furtive sexuality that is heavily implied in the suggested proximity between Mercy’s hand and Mrs Todgers’s breast, an act of “touch” that opens this “secret door”.

⁵¹ Barickman et al, *Corrupt Relations*, p106. Mrs Lupin, another widowed landlady, offers the same ideal of womanly provision that (as discussed in the second chapter) characterised the litigious Mrs Bardell of *The Pickwick Papers*. Mark’s initial flight from her in favour of male company parallels Pickwick’s horror at the prospect of marriage, even to one who exhibits exemplary wife material.

⁵² In her relation to the interconnected male attachments of Tom Pinch, Martin and Mark, the figure of Mary (similarly to that of Rosa Bud in *Edwin Drood*) acts as a sponge that absorbs their aberrant desires through their professions of longing for her. Ultimately she becomes oversaturated, the novel implying the insufficiencies of exclusive heterosexuality through a simple numbers game which loads three men (or four, counting the audacious Pecksniff) onto only one woman.

under circumstances as would keep other men down: and will you take me, or will you leave me” (p225). Mark’s desire “to come out strong” (which has him writing “jolly” on a slate in the extremity of his illness, p498), is here shown to operate in other modes than the comic. As a figure whose actions are always avowedly under-motivated, Mark exploits his reputation for apparently arbitrary action to sanction his excessive interest in the man he has a “liking for”.

Estranged from both his wealthy grandfather and from Pecksniff the pretender, Martin is literally succoured by Mark’s generous care:

[T]here was something in the fellow’s merry face, and in his manner – which with all its cheerfulness was far from being obtrusive or familiar – that quite disarmed him. He had lived a solitary life too, for many weeks, and the voice was pleasant in his ear (p224).

“Quite disarmed” by Mark’s charms, Martin responds to his proposal with the involuntary compulsion typical in Dickens’s accounts of same-sex attraction: “His anger melted away *in spite of himself*” and “*he could not help* thinking, either, what a brisk fellow this Mark was, and how great a change he had wrought in the atmosphere of the dismal little room already” (p225, p226, emphasis added). Though not feminised in speech or looks, Mark eagerly takes on the role of domestic goddess, meriting the description “brisk” which is usually reserved in Victorian fiction for the ‘little woman’. Catering for Martin in the London garret, he extends his role as caring provider on the outward voyage of *The Screw* to America. On their return journey, Mark’s abilities as bodily carer are officially acknowledged as he obtains a place as ship’s cook.

Mark’s adoption of the position of cook creates a gendered dissonance similar to that which contextualises his nursing of Martin in Eden.⁵³ Both roles are attributed to women in the Victorian imaginary, despite being frequently performed by men. Importantly, the rare accounts of male nursing that do exist support Dickens’s representations of gentle, intuitive,

⁵³ In ‘The Haunted House’ Dickens similarly attributes culinary skill to the male figure who excites excessive male approval, making Jack Governor into “Chief Cook”:

I have always regarded Jack as the finest looking sailor that ever sailed. He is grey now, but as handsome as he was a quarter of a century ago – nay, handsomer. A portly, cheery, well-built figure of a broad-shouldered man, with a frank smile, a brilliant dark eye, and a rich dark eyebrow. I remember those under darker hair, and they look all the better for their silver setting (p237).

This story also offers the suggestion that the men have endeavoured to resolve such physical admiration through in-lawing: “Jack once had that bright eye of his on my sister” (p241).

masculine efficiency. Various historical and literary commentators emphasise the sensitivity of these practitioners, destabilising the gender ideologies through which Victorian and current commentators conventionally ascribe this emotionally literate role to women. In opposition to Nightingale's critique of the thoughtless brutality of male nurses, Sarah Tooley's 1906 history of nursing repeatedly calls into question the feminine gendering of sympathy and selflessness. She describes the male orderlies of military hospitals, many of whom were convalescent or retired soldiers, as "kind and sympathetic to their sick comrades": "It would not have been easy to persuade an orderly who had fever himself, that he was not qualified to nurse a comrade similarly afflicted."⁵⁴ In such observations she resists the Duke of Newcastle's assumption that only the most desensitised women would be found less sympathetic than men: "The class of women employed as nurse had been very much addicted to drinking, and were found even more callous to the sufferings of soldiers in hospitals than men would have been."⁵⁵ Overturning the association of men with callousness, Tooley suggests that the empathy and skills of soldiers and military seamen uniquely equipped them as medical carers:

There was little he could not do for a sick mate on board ship, and experience thus gained made him a useful and intelligent nurse, when drafted into the wards of a hospital. A sailor, too, is so much accustomed to the exercise of skill and ingenuity at sea, that it serves him well on land [. . .] Nelson dying in the cockpit of the *Victory*, had tender and devoted nurses in his brave comrades, who knew how to minister to his needs in the last hour as they had rallied to his call for England's sake.⁵⁶

Across the Atlantic, Louisa M. Alcott had made similar claims for the sympathy and tenderness of those men who attended to one another in the military hospital where she nursed during the Civil War. It has been estimated that "as many as seventy-five percent of all nurses in the war were male. Many were enlisted men or convalescing soldiers who were designated to look after their comrades, and as such their aptitude for work varied."⁵⁷ Although Alcott was critical of the use of "sleepy half-sick" convalescents as nurses, she

⁵⁴ Sarah Tooley, *The History of Nursing in The British Empire* (London: Bousfield, 1906), p174.

⁵⁵ Duke of Newcastle, Evidence to War Commission 1855, quoted by Tooley, p170.

⁵⁶ Tooley, p193.

⁵⁷ Colin Macduff, 'Meeting the Mother Man: Rediscovering Walt Whitman, Writer and Nurse', *International History of Nursing Journal*, 3.2 (1997-8), pp32-44, p35. For further details see Susan Reverby, *Ordered to Care: The Dilemma of American Nursing, 1850-1945* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1987).

requested that these be replaced, not with women, but with “strong, properly trained, and cheerful men.”⁵⁸ She records being greatly assisted in her duties by the unofficial care performed by patients, rewarding convalescents – such as Fritz, “the big Russian” – for their timely tenderness:

The Prussian, with a nod and a smile, took the lad [a distressed twelve year old soldier] away to his own bed, and lulled him to sleep with a soothing murmur, like a mammoth humble bee. I liked that in Fritz, and if he ever wondered afterward at the dainties which sometimes found their way into his rations, or the extra comforts of his bed, he might have found a solution of the mystery in sundry persons’ knowledge of the fatherly action of that night.⁵⁹

Alcott’s description of this action as “fatherly” suggests her need to dissociate this example of bed sharing from the more homoerotic behaviours of the sickroom. From Alcott’s description the ward emerges as a distinctly eroticised space, home to incidents of bodily anxiety (such as her nervousness about washing the men and their embarrassed responses) and intense male relationships, including one that she describes as “a David and Jonathan sort of friendship”:

The Jonathan who so loved this comely David came creeping from his bed for a last look and word [. . .] They kissed each other, tenderly as women, and so parted for poor Ned [the David figure here] could not stay to see his comrade die.⁶⁰

Although Alcott falls back on a shared cultural understanding of the tenderness of women to describe a male emotional intimacy for which there was no masculine metaphor, her observations of the bodily care that male patients provided for one another consistently challenges this conventional gendering of sensitivity. Athena Vrettos fails to take such incidents into account in her argument that Alcott was centrally involved in “outlining the skills of an intuitive feminine hermeneutics, seeing it as a necessary skill for nursing the sick and wounded.”⁶¹ She acknowledges Alcott’s “more complex definition of femininity” only in the sense that Alcott questioned the ability of *all* women to make good nurses.

⁵⁸ Louisa M. Alcott, *Hospital Sketches* (1863 rpt. Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1960), p64, p66.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p48.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp30-31, p49, p56.

⁶¹ Athena Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), p30.

Vrettos concludes that in *Sketches* “the femininity of the nurse is predicated first and foremost on her capacity for emotional bonding with the patient.”⁶² Given Alcott’s repeated observations of an often restorative emotional bonding between male patients, Vrettos’s assertion demonstrates the tenacity of gendered assumptions about nursing, suggesting more about the limitations of existing histories of nursing than about the gender ambiguities that emerged in nineteenth-century nursing practice and discourse.

“Undream’d-of Depths of Emotion”: Walt Whitman’s Specimen Days

In his poetic and autobiographical reflections on his work in military hospitals tending to the wounded of the American Civil War, Walt Whitman offers some of the very few first-hand descriptions of male nursing. In *Specimen Days* (1882-3), reminiscences drawn from the notebooks he jotted during his time in military hospitals, Whitman estimates that he made over six-hundred visits during “those three years in hospital, camp or field”, describing himself “as sustainer of spirit and body in some degree, in time of need.”⁶³ Whitman recounts the range of caring duties he performed, with an emphasis on the emotional and psychological benefit that the sick wounded derived from his company:

In my visits to the hospitals I found it was in the simple matter of personal presence, and emanating ordinary cheer and magnetism, that I succeeded and helped more than by medical nursing, or delicacies or gifts of money, or anything else.⁶⁴

As a volunteer carer, unfettered by official professional duties, Whitman was free to expend time on particularly severe cases, responding to “mark’d cases needing special and sympathetic nourishment.”⁶⁵ Like Dickens’s unprofessionalised male carers, Whitman utilised his unofficial status to provide a unique, highly emotional, and personal brand of nursing:

There I sit down and either talk to, or silently cheer them up. They always like it hugely (and so do I). Each case has its peculiarities, and needs some new adaptation. I have [. . .] learnt a good deal of hospital wisdom. Some of the poor young chaps, away from home for the first time in their lives,

⁶² Ibid., p32.

⁶³ Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days and Collect* (Philadelphia: Ross Welsh, 1882-3), p78.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p38.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p51.

hunger and thirst for affection; this is sometimes the only thing that will reach their condition.⁶⁶

This avowal of personal pleasure – “and so do I” – is typical of Whitman’s frank acknowledgement of the reciprocity of his emotional and physical engagement with patients. Throughout *Specimen Days* he records his admiration, describing how he “took a fancy to one patient”, found another “a fine specimen of youthful physical manliness”, and sympathised with another “poor youth, so handsome athletic, with profuse beautiful shining hair.”⁶⁷ As Colin Macduff has observed, “one of the most striking aspects of Whitman’s approach was his openness as a man about what he was getting out of the experience personally.”⁶⁸ Whitman records instances of mutually beneficial physical contact, such as that shared with Oscar Wilber – “He behaved very manly and affectionate. The kiss I gave him as I was about leaving he return’d fourfold” – and with a rebel soldier: “I loved him much, always kiss’d him and he did me.”⁶⁹ In his letters, reminiscences and poetry he employs suggestive, sexual language in his tribute to the intense emotional, and perhaps erotic, fulfilment of nursing:

I never had my feelings so thoroughly and (so far) permanently absorbed, to the very roots, as by these huge swarms of dear, wounded, sick, dying boys – I get very much attached to some of them, and many of them have come to depend on seeing me [letter to his brother, Jeff].⁷⁰

At the end of *Specimen Days* he describes his time in the hospitals as “the greatest privilege and satisfaction [. . .] It arous’d and brought out and decided undream’d-of depths of emotion.”⁷¹

M. Wynn Thomas suggests that Whitman felt that “a different ‘currency’ circulated in the hospitals – a currency of love and affection symbolised [. . .] both by the little gifts he brought the men and the caresses he exchanged with them.”⁷² As Whitman puts it, “while cash is not amiss to bring up the rear, tact and magnetic sympathy and unction are, and ever

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p32, p36, p37.

⁶⁸ Macduff, p38.

⁶⁹ Whitman, *Specimen Days*, p41, p74.

⁷⁰ Quoted by B. Knapp, *Walt Whitman* (New York: Continuum, 1993), p51.

⁷¹ Whitman, *Specimen Days*, p78.

⁷² M. Wynn Thomas, ‘Fratricide and Brotherly Love: Whitman and the Civil War’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. by Ezra Greenspan (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), pp27-44, p43.

will be, sovereign still.”⁷³ This is very similar to Mark Tapley’s alternative definition of ‘credit’ through his ministry of tender care in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. As Bowen has argued, “the novel plays and puns throughout on central terms of financial exchange, most noticeably in Mark Tapley’s search for ‘credit’ throughout the book, a very different credit from the kind of ‘credit’ that the Anglo-Bengalee rests on.”⁷⁴ Both Whitman and Dickens, then, present physical and emotional ministrations as a means of circumventing the sterile cash nexus.

Whitman provides another explicit exploration of the combined emotional and physical pleasures of nursing in the ‘Drum-Taps’ section of *Leaves of Grass* (first ed. 1865):

“Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,/ Straight and swift to my wounded I go.”⁷⁵

Leslie Fiedler suggests that “most people [. . .] remembering images of nurses in literature do not recall this poem, in part because Whitman was of the wrong gender, a male pretender to a role which mythologically we associate with the female of the species.”

Whitman did not choose the label ‘nurse’ to describe his own role, preferring the terms “hospital missionary” and “sustainer of spirit and body.” However, as Macduff discerns, his language in *Specimen Days* does destabilise the conventional gendering of nursing: “In a reversal of the current situation, where *male* is often used to prefix the term *nurse* when discriminating a non-female occupant of the role, Whitman often distinguishes *female* or *lady nurses*.”⁷⁶ Whilst expressing concerns about unprepared young lady nurses, Whitman is largely complimentary about the female staff he works with, selecting those for particular commendation who offered the kind of personal, emotional and “tender” service that he practiced: “One of the finest nurses I met was a red-faced illiterate old Irish woman; I have

⁷³ Whitman, *Specimen Days*, p57.

⁷⁴ Bowen, p196.

⁷⁵ Walt Whitman, ‘The Wound Dresser’, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. by Michael Moon (New York and London: Norton, 2002), pp259-261, lines 25-6. Robert Leigh Davis proposes that Civil War nursing was a particularly liminal occupation, which placed practitioners at the fault line of “a culture deeply divided by race, gender, class and regional loyalty.” He compellingly argues that Whitman and Alcott (as well as Emma Edmonds who cross-dressed in terms of race, gender, class and military loyalty to survive as a field nurse) experienced Civil War nursing as a way of rendering “normally self-evident boundaries fluid and unstable” and as a means of “‘mov[ing] between’ the fixed lines of established order” [*Whitman and the Romance of Medicine* (Berkeley and London: U of California P, 1997), p45]. Whitman is particularly explicit about his refusal to recognise distinctions of allegiance, rank and race in his egalitarian provision of care: “I can say that in my ministrings I comprehended all, whoever came in my way, northern or southern, and slighted none” (*Specimen Notes*, p78).

⁷⁶ Macduff, p38.

seen her take the poor wasted naked boys so tenderly up in her arms.”⁷⁷ Whitman also provides testimony to the much needed care provided by other men.⁷⁸

Commentators have only just begun to recognise the importance of Whitman’s writings on nursing. As Macduff puts it, “despite their being much in his writings which yield insight into the value of nursing and the art of caring, Whitman seems largely a forgotten figure in nursing, meriting only passing reference in traditional textbooks of nursing history.”⁷⁹

Macduff suggests that speculation about Whitman’s probable homosexuality “may explain nursing’s reluctance to recognise Whitman, in that there is conflict with the popular image of the nurse as ‘sexless secular saint.’”⁸⁰ Fiedler similarly argues that there is a critical discomfort with Whitman’s “vision of the eros of nursing”, with the “hints of lubricity and sado-masochism” that colour his poetic scrutiny and celebration of maimed male bodies:⁸¹

From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,
I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and the blood,
Back on his pillow the soldier bends with curv’d neck and side-falling head [. . .]
I am faithful, I do not give out,
The fractur’d thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,
These and more I dress with impassive hand, (yet deep in my breast, a fire, a
burning flame.)⁸²

The subtle shifts from the clinical to the admiring gaze, from the methodical exterior to the emotional interior, provide a rare description of the professional skill, personal reaction and erotic response that can come together in the activity of nursing. The dresser’s sense that he “could not refuse this moment to die” to save a young patient and the physicality of the

⁷⁷ Whitman, *Specimen Notes*, p61. Whitman “like[d] the woman nurse in Ward E” for similar reasons: “I noticed how she sat a long time by a poor fellow” (p30).

⁷⁸ Whitman records the particularly poignant account of a soldier who, having been left wounded on the field for fifty hours, received kind treatment from a “good secesh”: “One middle aged man, however, who seemed to be moving around the field, among the dead and wounded for benevolent purposes, came to him in a way he will never forget; treated our soldier kindly, bound up his wounds, cheer’d him, gave him a couple of biscuits and a drink of whiskey and water, asked him if he could eat some beef” (Ibid., p29).

⁷⁹ Macduff, p33. Theorists of how the body impacts on questions of what it means to be human are finally recognising the pertinence of Whitman’s work to such an enquiry. William Cody places Whitman at the heart of his exploration of nursing as a human science in ‘Of Life Immense in Passion, Pulse and Power: Dialoguing with Walt Whitman and Parse: A Hermeneutic Study’, in *Illuminations: The Human Becoming Theory in Practice and Research*, ed. by Rosemarie Parse (New York: National League for Nursing Press, 1995), pp269-307.

⁸⁰ Macduff, p41.

⁸¹ Fiedler, p108.

⁸² Whitman, ‘The Wound Dresser’, lines 45-7, 56-8.

final two lines, point suggestively to the spiritually and sexually transcendent extent of the patient/nurse relations that develop in this heightened atmosphere:

(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd and rested,
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)⁸³

Whilst academic critics have been unwilling to acknowledge the erotic dynamic of male nursing, emphasised so forcefully in Whitman's work, writers in other media have been less reluctant. Philip Dacey's poem 'Walt Whitman Falls Asleep Over Florence Nightingale's *Notes on Nursing*' positions Whitman and Nightingale side-by-side as icons of care: "Call us nursing's perfect, if strangest pair."⁸⁴ In a queer vision of this couple in joint charge of a ward, Dacey plays with the erotic connotations of nursing, describing Nightingale's as "the face that launched a dozen suitor's dreams", to suggest the similar romantic response of male patients to both Nightingale and Whitman:

[. . .] Wherever her silhouette
ripples across a pillow as we move,
lips curse-heavy press with a touch as light
as a girl's against coarse cloth, imprinting a love
I do not envy, having known it too.⁸⁵

This chapter certainly does not seek to strengthen any simplistic equation of male nursing with homosexuality – a reductive assumption still commonly made:

The persisting predominant image of the male nurse as homosexual is based on the idea that nursing is woman's work, and mistakenly assumes a correlation between non-acceptance of gender role and non-conformity in terms of sexual preference.⁸⁶

There is clearly much work to be done on a thorough history of men in nursing, with a definite space within that history for a study of the homoerotic experience of nurse and patient roles. Positioning Whitman as a "significant figure in a putative gay tradition

⁸³ Ibid., lines 37-8, 64-5.

⁸⁴ Philip Dacey, 'Walt Whitman Falls Asleep Over Florence Nightingale's *Notes on Nursing*', *Shenandoah*, 45.2 (1995), pp36-39, p37.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Macduff, p41. John Evans offers a detailed exploration of the ongoing assumptions about gender and sexuality that mean that "men in the nursing profession continue to be stereotyped as anomalies, effeminate or homosexual" ['Men in Nursing: Issues of Gender Segregation and Hidden Advantage', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 26.2 (1997), pp226-231, p228]. Evans concludes that male nurses now often choose, or are tracked into, "more masculine specialisms", particularly areas of technical expertise that are not "associated with feminine nursing traits – specifically the need to touch and the delivery of intimate care at the bedside."

within the history of men in nursing”, as Macduff proposes, offers important, experiential support for the literary expression of homoerotic desire through explorations of same-sex nursing.⁸⁷ The highly positive intimacy of same-sex bodywork presented in Dickens’s fiction anticipates Whitman’s explicit celebration of the physical pleasures of nursing men. Once again Dickens’s fictional strategies both cohere with actual homoerotic experiences and anticipate the later techniques employed by those writers who strove for more explicit articulations of homosexuality.

“Devoted to him Heart and Hand”: Edenic Male Nursing

Throughout the ‘Drum-taps’ section Whitman repeatedly emphasises the professional and emotional status of nursing through a focus on damaged and vulnerable bodies that desperately require such care.⁸⁸ Dickens uses a similar technique in the highly corporeal *Martin Chuzzlewit*, heightening the importance of effective, loving nursing through comparison with the uncaring practices of infamous hired nurses Sairey Gamp and her hospital nursing friend, Betsy Prig. The one dimensional caricature of the ‘old nurse’ that Dickens offered through these figures immediately became pivotal in calls for nursing reforms. *Martin Chuzzlewit* calls for the eradication of “disciples of the Prig school of nursing (who [according to Dickens] are very numerous among professional ladies)” (p666).⁸⁹ As Toshikatsu Murayama observes, “no doctor or nurse can give proper

⁸⁷ Macduff, p43. Macintosh quotes a report from a woman who worked as a Matron at Manchester Royal Infirmary from 1929 which suggests a motivational link between male homosexuality and nursing: “I was also on the Penal and Disciplinary committee – that was a terrible thing to be on, they were treated just like a court of law, and those men who were homosexuals (we used to get such a lot of them who’d taken up nursing precisely for that reason) of course they got into trouble very often over that” (p234). Unfortunately the matron does not elaborate on what she saw as the benefits of nursing work for the homosexual male. Neither does she observe the erotic implications for female nurses of her assumption.

⁸⁸ See, for example, the range of fragile, damaged and vilified bodies with which ‘The Sleepers’ is concerned. The dreamer immediately encounters “the wretched features of ennuyés, the white features of corpses, the livid faces of drunkards, the sick-grey faces of onanists/ The gashed bodies on battle-fields, the insane in their strong-doored rooms [. . .]” [‘The Sleepers’, *Leaves of Grass*, pp356-364, lines 8-9].

⁸⁹ Sairey Gamp’s influence persists in current histories of nursing. She receives attention from recent critics including Judd (p34) and Bashford (p21), and is given a whole chapter in Tooley’s 1906 history. Tooley argues that “what *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was to the abolition movement, *Martin Chuzzlewit* was to nursing reform” (p46) and Toshikatsu Murayama justly describes Gamp as “the most famous or notorious nurse in English literature” [Toshikatsu Murayama, ‘A Professional Contest Over the Body: Quackery and Respectable Medicine in *Martin Chuzzlewit*’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 30.2 (2002), pp403-420, p403]. Whilst Gamp was most often held up as a demonic figure of all that was bad about unreformed nursing, it is important to recognise the enabling effect she had for some actual female nurses such as Alcott. Alcott frames *Hospital Sketches* with a Sairey Gamp quote and makes comic comparison between herself and Gamp throughout, alleviating the horrors of military hospital through humour: “[I go] armed with lavender

treatment to the numerous sick people in this text full of physical disorders.”⁹⁰ In old Martin Chuzzlewit’s choice of Mary as medical attendant, Murayama notes the preference for amateur nursing over all the suspect official medical practitioners in this novel.

Despite his observation of amateur and domestic care as well as the ‘professional’ and hospital nursing considered by the novel, Murayama does not acknowledge the crucial, life-preserving nursing that Mark and Martin offer each other, in a terrain that precludes more conventional forms of medical care. The feverish corporeality of Martin and Mark’s experiences in Eden qualify this as another of the novel’s “libidinised sites, identified by”, as Lougy details, “bloody wounds, flushed faces, and tumescent organs, testifying to unspoken narratives.”⁹¹ Although Lougy is extremely astute to other such bodily sites, his typical preference for “the erotic dynamics of violence” leads him to read exclusively for “libidinised sites marked by the sudden appearance of blood.”⁹² His limited, brutal reading of “the ways in which the body speaks” prevents him from recognising the positive, restorative physicality that takes place in Eden. In a later article Lougy observes (only to immediately deny) the homoerotic effect of Eden as a wilderness environment that mirrors the common site of male bonding in texts more readily placed in the genre of male quest romance:

One of the most striking differences between the English and the American episodes of the novel is the copious absence of women in the latter. In the male-dominated community of Elijah Pogram, Scadders, Hannibal Chollop, and Major Pawkins, there is no room for Sairy Gamp, Betsy Prig or the numerous female figures that populate the English landscapes of the novel. In part, Dickens’s images remind us of those homoerotic bonds delineated by nineteenth-century American writers such as Melville, Whitman and Mark Twain. But something else, I think, is going on as well.⁹³

water, with which I so bespinkled myself and the premises, that, like my friend, Sairy, I was soon known among my patients as the nurse with the bottle” (p29).

⁹⁰ Murayama, p403.

⁹¹ Lougy, ‘Repressive and Expressive Forms’, p40.

⁹² Ibid., p51, p48. In his exploration of the erotics of “the wound” Lougy compares Charity’s excitement at Tom’s violence to Jonas “to the scene in *Great Expectations* when Estella first allows Pip to kiss her after she secretly witnesses a fight between himself and Herbert Pocket.”

⁹³ Robert Lougy, ‘Nationalism and Violence: America in Dickens’s *Martin Chuzzlewit*’, in *Dickens and the Children of Empire*, pp105-115, p111. Lougy participates in a typical, reductive critical practice of opening the possibility of homoerotic reading, only to obscure it by prioritising that implicitly more important

It is significant that the absent women that Lougy actually names are those that seek to monopolise the potentially lucrative domestic sickbed through their “one off, one on” method of perpetual attendance (p672). Mark and Martin’s emigration to the unpromising Eden – “so choked with slime and matted growth was the hideous swamp which bore that name” (p360) – removes them from all female contact, literally delivering them into one another’s hands. As the scene of exclusive male cohabitation and nursing, this site becomes an unlikely Arcadia, paralleling the remote relocation of SMIKE and Nicholas which enables their select caring partnership, away from all possibility of female participation.⁹⁴ Despite the unpromising location, the survival of Martin and Mark through mutual nursing triumphantly reworks the ultimately tragic conclusion to the earlier pastoral idyll, providing a more celebratory image of male care.

The water and “black ooze” (p363), which threatens to submerge the sickly settlement at Eden, marks the site’s marginality in a similar way to the lubricity of the “oozy” port, menaced by “the undermining and besieging sea” that Miss Wade selects as her home with Harriet. In another anticipation of Dickens’s description of the liminality of Calais as gathering place for “French vagabonds and English outlaws”, Dickens describes America, in his travel writing, as a country “which our vagabonds do so particularly favour.”⁹⁵ Martin and Mark’s fortune-seeking venture as a result of straitened domestic finances qualifies them as economic outcasts, of the type best represented later by the Micawber family. However, their emotional and physical intimacy also positions them among the many sexually dissident male emigrants of Dickens’s corpus. As with Herbert and Handel, life overseas allows Martin and Mark to experience an alternative form of domesticity. They “set up house in the Eden settlement”, Barickman et al argue, “in a masculine travesty of the first marriage relationship.”⁹⁶

Martin’s sojourn in Eden ostensibly functions as a painful education in humility and selflessness. However, inextricable from these lessons is his highly eroticised regard for

‘something else’, here a Freudian reading of impossible desires to be reintegrated with a regenerative landscape.

⁹⁴ For the significance and longevity of Arcadian ideals in “the homosexual literary tradition” see R. S. Fone Byrne, ‘This Other Eden’ (p13), and Stuart Kellog, (ed.), ‘The Uses of Homosexuality in Literature’ in *Literary Visions of Homosexuality*, pp1-12, p4.

⁹⁵ *American Notes*, p77.

⁹⁶ Barickman et al, p105.

the man who saves him. Martin falls into “an aggravated kind of fever” (p488), which the ever affectionate Mark responds to with a heightened compassion parallel to that offered to Pip by both Joe and Herbert: ““I said you must be ill’, returned Mark tenderly, ‘and now I’m sure of it’” (p366). Mark undertakes “all his various duties of attendance on Martin”, receiving some rudimentary training in nursing from a sickly settler:

They had some medicine in their chest; and this man of sad experience showed Mark how and when to administer it, and how he could best alleviate the sufferings of Martin (p488).

The extremity of Martin’s fever as he hovers “very near his death”, effects a revelation of Mark’s attachment as he forgets all the irritations of living with Martin: “He remembered nothing but the better qualities of his fellow-wanderer, and was devoted to him heart and hand” (p496). This heartfelt devotion is shown to be mutual when Mark falls ill of the same disease, the fever moving suggestively from its penetration of one male body to the other, causing a reversal of nurse/patient roles: “Whenever Martin gave him drink or medicine, or tended him in any way, or came into the house returning from some drudgery without, the patient Mr Tapley brightened up, and cried: ‘I’m jolly, sir: I’m jolly!’” (p496). Martin’s character recovery is largely effected by his careful observation of his laid-up servant:

Now when Martin began to think of this, and to look at Mark as he lay there, never reproaching him by so much as an expression of regret; never murmuring; always striving to be manful and staunch; he began to think, how it was that this man who had had so few advantages, was so much better than he who had had so many? And attendance on a sick bed, but especially the sick bed of one of whom we have been accustomed to see in full activity and vigour, being a great breeder of reflection, he began to ask himself in what they differed (p496).

Martin’s self scrutiny legitimises the erotically connotative scrutiny of a nurse who admires the “manful” “staunch[ness]” of his patient.

Fever permits more than emotional and physical contact: in their mutual nursing Martin and Mark break down the class boundary between servant and served, between “the new master and the new man”(p229) and between “Chuzzlewit and co” (p364) to become partners. When both men recover through the assiduous care of the other, they wait out their passage

away from Eden with an intensified, bedtime intimacy: “Often at night when Mark and Martin were alone, and lying down to sleep, they spoke of home, familiar places, houses, roads and people whom they knew” (p499). Nancy Aycock Metz has read homesickness as the central contributor to emigrant illnesses, positioning Eden as the site where Martin “comes face to face with his own nostalgic grief for England, and inextricably for the English domestic ideal.”⁹⁷ However, Martin’s character-reformation at this wilderness location also provides a critique of the limitations of “the English domestic ideal”. The explicit liberation of a better and truer self here is mirrored by the more covertly expressed experience of erotic freedom. Aycock’s conclusion that Dickens “harboured the dark suspicion that emigration itself was a malady for which the only cure was ‘home’”⁹⁸ continues the torch-bearing for a critically fantasised model of ‘Dickensian’ domesticity, belied by the repeated assertion throughout Dickens’s career that emigration offered scope for much-needed alternative ways of living.

Unusually for Dickens’s fiction, Mark and Martin do return ‘home’, but their negotiation of conventional domesticity is continued beyond their homecoming. On their return the narrative ostensibly works to reprioritise Martin’s relationships, re-pairing him with Mary. Martin, however, hardly expresses the ardour of a returning lover, having to be reminded by Mark that his first course of action is “to see Miss Mary, of course” (p518).⁹⁹ Moreover, Martin continues to gain his greatest pleasure from pleasing Mark (p699) and is unable to suppress frequent hyperbole on the virtues of his friend, focusing on his physical restoration at Mark’s hands: “But for this faithful man [. . . who] has been, throughout, my zealous and devoted friend; but for him, I must have died abroad” (p627). Mark provides a moving account of the continued mutuality of their relationship, when it is suggested that Martin may think that he would desert him:

We have been that sort of companions in misfortune; that my opinion is,
he don’t believe a word of it (p746).

⁹⁷ Nancy Aycock Metz, “‘Fevered with Anxiety for Home’: Nostalgia and the New Emigrant in *Martin Chuzzlewit*”, *Dickens Quarterly*, 18.2 (2001), pp49-62, p60.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Martin’s insufficient enthusiasm parallels his entire lack of concern at leaving Mary. As Barickman et al observe, on his departure “young Martin hardly gives a thought to Mary Graham; he seems more intent on fleeing all the pressures of social life in England, including the complexities of sexual relations” (p104). Mark is similarly reluctant in his final incorporation into the fabric of the domestic novel through marriage to Mrs Lupin. Mark’s ‘surrender’ to this extremely belated desire smacks of the self-disciplining visible in Pip’s hugely postponed proposal to Biddy.

Given the life-preserving intensity of their overseas connection, Mark and Martin's relation is never fully repatriated, breaking out apparently uncontrollably to threaten the typical boundaries of the domestic plot.

The extremely tender expressions of desire offered in Dickens's scenes of same-sex nursing provide an alternative frame of interpretation to that passed forward by the homoerotic violence thesis. Caring bodywork across Dickens's corpus establishes another positive motif for homoerotic articulation, demonstrating the insufficiency of brutal readings and the limitations of interpretations that position Dickens as 'homophobic'. Whilst it would be reductive to suggest that such contacts operate exclusively to enable an otherwise prohibited physical proximity, in a discipline dominated by a criticism that privileges the erotics of aggression, it is crucial to recognise the proliferation of alternative, and no less culturally eroticised, ways of more tender touching.

Conclusions

Dickens presents a distinctly queer corpus, in which the putative ‘norm’ of reproductive marital coupling is everywhere de-instated by the fecundity and vibrancy of a vast variety of alternative relationships. From the expression of heterosexual aversion through wilful celibacy to the negotiation of alternative domestic spaces in families of choice and homotropic locales Dickens departs from a heterocentric model. Far from enshrining the heterosexist family values which have been so firmly associated with him, Dickens succeeds in articulating and celebrating a wide range of highly positive homoerotics. As this thesis demonstrates, Victorian same-sex desire did find coherent ways to “speak in its own behalf.”¹ Dickens’s novels distinctly articulated homoerotic experiences, before homosexuality, lesbianism or heterosexuality were constructed as official categories. By taking in the entire Dickens canon, this thesis has sought to demonstrate the force that such articulations acquired, particularly for regular readers, through cross-textual reiteration. Drawing on a rich homoerotic literary tradition as well as experiences of same-sex desire gleaned from his own reporting, newspapers, friends and overseas travel, Dickens created a variety of representational strategies that cohered with contemporary homosexual experience. Testimony to the success of these homoerotic strategies is provided by those readers who became writers, deploying Dickens’s explorations of sibling desire transference, homotropics and the erotics of nursing to structure their more explicit homotexts later in the nineteenth century and beyond.

While the project has discovered a greater proliferation of male homoerotics, these overlap instructively with, often less developed, inter-female desires. To omit the female examples would be to risk further consigning female desire to the margins of sexual history, and would give an unjustly narrow picture of Dickens’s wide-ranging interest in non-normative desires.

In its focus on homoerotics this project only takes in one element of Dickens’s wider attention to alternative lifestyles and families of choice. As the thesis has discovered, the pleasures of reproductive heterosexuality are a decidedly minority pursuit in Dickens’s

¹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, p101.

work. Other recurrent deviations ripe for sustained new study include the familial desire of numbers of incestuous households, the blissful, childless couples and the practices of adoption and fostering explored in the Dickens canon.

The huge range of same-sex desires represented in Dickens's fiction means that even a thesis-length study is not comprehensive. The mistress and maid erotics of Lady Dedlock and Rosa, for example, observed so acutely in Mary Armstrong's thesis, are not included here; nor are the same-sex desires of Scrooge that Léger discusses in his dissertation. As it became apparent that homoeros pervades Dickens's work, this project abandoned pretensions to exhaustivity in favour of a focus upon those instances of same-sex desire that participate in Dickens's previously unrecognised homocentric strategies.

Throughout the project, non-academic interpretations of Dickens's work have proved to be less constrained by institutional and national investments, offering instructive queer perspectives. From Xavier Mayne's early inclusion of Dickens in his ideal "homosexual library" to Douglas McGrath's recent adaptation of *Nicholas Nickleby*, readers have sought to re-present a version of Dickens that challenges and destabilises heterosexual interpretation. There is work to be done on the audience effects of particularly queer performances and casting decisions; the impact, for example, of gay actor Simon Callow becoming the popular 'face' of Dickens in Britain (even portraying him in prime-time 2005 TV series 'Doctor Who'). Callow's performance in the one-man stage show 'The Mystery of Charles Dickens' (written by Peter Ackroyd, first performed in 2000 and much televised since) surely has a certain queer undertone for those who witnessed Callow as Oscar Wilde in a very similarly formatted single-performer production, 'The Importance of Being Oscar', written by Michael MacLiammor and performed in 1997. For those who remember Callow as the nation's Oscar (his institutional status reflected in his reading of *De Profundis* at the Wilde Centenary at Westminster Abbey in 2000) his reincarnation as 'Dickens' has more significance than the average career move.

A similar effect is created in the casting decisions for McGrath's *Nicholas Nickleby*. The film features Charlie Hunnam (famous for his preceding starring role in British TV series 'Queer as Folk') as Nicholas alongside a Smike played by Jamie Bell (best known as ballet dancing Billy Elliot). The actors' histories as provocative homosexual and gender-

ambivalent characters are re-energised by the film's lingering physical scenes of Nicholas's bodily care for Smike, and moving representation of the abused young man's absolute dedication to his handsome rescuer. The picture also casts Barry Humphries (who also cameos in a small male role) as Mrs Crummles, billing this performance in the credits as "Barry Humphries as Dame Edna Everage as Mrs Crummles." This hyperbolic distancing of the 'authentic' performer, and the suggestion here of the performative operation of gender, reflects this production's wider efforts to convey the absolute theatricality of Dickens's work. The use of exaggerated drag also helps to circumvent any simplistic equation of 'inverted' desire and 'inverted' gender. Scenes between Nicholas and Smike are powerfully homoerotic without suggesting either character's effeminacy. This representation is faithful to the complexity of Dickens's understanding of desire and gender in an era before emasculation had become the unhelpful conceptual double of male homosexuality. The impact that Dickens's own immersion in the theatre had on his perception of 'character' is conveyed by the opening credits of the adaptation; here the cast are transformed into the cardboard characters of a Victorian toy theatre, similar to that which Dickens built and 'played' with, with his own children.

In relation to a single novel, McGrath's production suggests the kind of queer reading that, as this thesis argues, Dickens invited throughout his entire career. While McGrath does not describe the film as queer in the director's overview, he does dwell upon his transposition of the creation of families of choice in the novel, selecting Smike's declaration to Nicholas, "You are my home" (from p162, chapter thirteen of the novel), as "the most important line in the entire script." McGrath suggests that Dickens's definition of kinship "is something quite unique – it isn't what you think it is, that family stands for family that blood stands by blood, it's much more about the people that you care about and the people that you'd give your blood for." In support of this reading for families of affinity, the script adds extra dialogue to that provided in Dickens's chapter thirty-five, when Smike meets Kate. Kate's new toast to "our extended family" and Smike's enthusiastic response, "our family", endorses the in-lawing reading made in this thesis. The production also focuses on the suggestive physical similarity of these siblings, casting relatively unknown actress Romola Garai as Kate, primarily because of her striking resemblance to Charlie Hunnam's Nicholas. Just as the novel emphasises the importance of familial body-doubling, the production draws attention to this through the careful casting and costuming of the

Cheeryble brothers, who are almost indistinguishable in the film even down to their identically decorated and equipped offices.

Furthermore, McGrath's picture consistently displays an awareness of the heterosexual insufficiencies of Dickens's novel. A final section in which Nicholas proposes to Madeline is added, as, despite the absence of such material in Dickens's text, McGrath felt that "we could not have the movie without a proper love scene between these two people we've come to care so much about." The originally rather thin "proper" love-plot is shored-up by reams of newly scripted, but somewhat trite, conventional romantic dialogue. However, the disjunction of tone in this unconvincing final section is a further pointer, to those familiar with the novel, to the heterosexual 'resolutions' that Dickens very deliberately left unspoken. Even with this additional material the heterosexual relationship in the film adaptation fails to equal the level of intensity achieved in the Nicholas/Smike scenes, which, in their extreme tenderness, are faithfully reproduced from Dickens.

Deploying adaptation as critical text, these after-texts illuminate a substantial vein of homoeroticism in Dickens's fiction. Much fruitful work could be done on adaptations and intertexts that expose the homoerotics of Dickens's novels, and of Victorian works more generally, by transposing them onto new media. As Sarah Waters says in an interview about her nineteenth-century literary 'pastiche', *Fingersmith* (2002), "lesbian desires [. . . are] sort of there as a subtext to lots of Victorian fiction. But what I've been able to do, writing with our literary mores today, is to tease them right out and put them at the centre of the story rather than kind of at the edges."² Within a field dominated by conventional criticism too often chary of acknowledging the diversity of Dickens, as the alleged champion of 'respectable' fiction, adaptation can be read an important commentator, able to move beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries to recognise a truly queer Dickens.

This thesis takes in a whole spectrum of same-sex attachments, from intense emotional and affectionate commitments to the most full-blooded physical attraction. Whilst recognising the great conceptual value of Sedgwick's 'homosocial continuum', this thesis will not allow the wilful silencing of the homoerotic through the wide-spread, perverse misapplication of

² Sarah Waters, 'Behind the Scenes of *Fingersmith*', *Fingersmith* DVD, directed by Aisling Walsh (2005).

the term 'homosocial.' Through a commitment to the bodily dynamics of desire, this project circumvents the sterile disembodiment of much queer theory, endeavouring to present the fully fleshed homoerotics of those instances where passionate friendship is an insufficient designation. Focusing on the insatiable appetites, body-doublings, physical relocations and tender bodywork of Dickens's corpus, the second half of this thesis moves desire beyond affect, into the highly corporal realm of homoerotic effect.

A departure from the limiting homoerotic violence thesis allows more tender desires between men and between women to become visible. There is, then, a deliberate bias towards the soft touch in this thesis's recognition of the proliferation of gentle homoerotic contacts throughout Dickens's oeuvre. Without denying the accuracy of antagonistic interpretations, this study suggests that affirmative, anti-violence readings are of greater political pertinence. It is hoped that the recognition of the homocentric elements of Dickens's imagination will suggest new, more positive, ways of seeing homosexuality, deprivileging the homoerotic violence thesis in Victorian studies and beyond.

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